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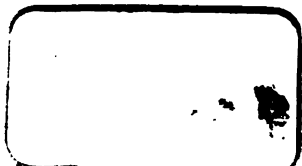
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The Ordeal by Fire

By

A Sergeant in the French Army

Marcel Berger

Translated by

Mrs. Cecil Curtis

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CONTENTS

PART I

BOOK I

August 1, 1914

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. JEANNINE LANDRY	3
II. A YOUNG MAN OF 1914	11
III. BELLS	19
IV. A MOUNTAIN VILLAGE, THE SAME EVENING	25
V. A MEDITATION AT THE WINDOW	31

BOOK II

August 2nd-3rd

VI. I GO BACK BY TRAIN	40
VII. PARIS, AT FIRST SIGHT	45
VIII. MY FATHER	51
IX. MY FRIEND	60
X. EVENING, ON THE BOULEVARDS	66

BOOK III

August 4th-5th

XI. THE FIRST STAGE	72
XII. NEW COMRADES AND OLD	79

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIII. KNOCKS AND CONTACTS	85
XIV. THE EXISTING STATE OF MIND	93
XV. AT THE GLOBE CAFÉ	103
XVI. CAVILLINGS	117
XVII. SUSPICIONS OF EMOTION	125
XVIII. A RETURN OF EGOISM	131

PART II

BOOK IV

August 9th-12th

I. UNDER WAY	141
II. HARASSED, ALREADY	150
III. IN BILLETS	160
IV. AN ALARM	170
V. A THUNDERBOLT	176

BOOK V

August 12th-13th

VI. ON THE WAY TO THE FIRING LINE	184
VII. I EXAMINE MY CONSCIENCE	190
VIII. AWAITING OUR CUE	196
IX. THE BAPTISM OF FIRE	207
X. A MOMENT'S RESPITE	216
XI. A MUCH STIFFER MATTER	221
XII. WE COLLECT OURSELVES	232

Contents

v

BOOK VI

August 14th-25th

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIII. A VICTORIOUS DAWN	239
XIV. EN ROUTE AGAIN	250
XV. A NIGHT ON OUTPOST DUTY	255
XVI. GOOD COMRADES	265
XVII. DE VALPIC	272
XVIII. DARK HOURS	278
XIX. SPINCOURT	288
XX. THE WAR BEGINS	296

PART III

BOOK VII

August 25th-September 2nd

I. IN RETREAT	307
II. DARK DAYS	314
III. STRENGTH OF MIND	323
IV. OH, MY FRIENDS	330
V. A SHADOW ON THE PICTURE	337
VI. THE POILUS	349
VII. SOCIALISM	357
VIII. A TEMPTATION	362
IX. AT PEACE WITH MYSELF	372

BOOK VIII

September 2nd-7th

CHAPTER	PAGE
X. NEWS AT LAST	379
XI. THE CATHEDRAL	386
XII. PESSIMISM	394
XIII. A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER	401
XIV. HIGH STRATEGY	410
XV. A WORD IN SEASON	419

BOOK IX

September 7th-9th

XVI. FINAL ANTICIPATION	433
XVII. WE TAKE UP OUR POSITION	441
XVIII. THE FIRST IMPACT	447
XIX. HOLDING OUT	453
XX. WE ARE NOT DEFEATED	460
XXI. THE CULMINATION	470
XXII. SERENITY	478

PART IV

BOOK X

Epilogue

I. APPREHENSIONS	485
----------------------------	-----

Contents

vii

CHAPTER	PAGE
II. RELIEF	494
III. A SUNLIT CONVALESCENCE	500
IV. THE AWAKENING	509
V. A GIRL OF 1915	519

PART I

BOOK I

August 1, 1914

CHAPTER I

JEANNINE LANDRY

I CAN see myself again on that afternoon walking up and down the platform of Vallorbe Station. At my side little André, aged twelve, sailor-collared and bare-legged, besieged me with questions concerning sport. It was his craze. I did my best to give him the information he wanted, while waiting impatiently for his people to reappear.

I had offered to look after the ladies' luggage, but the grandmother had declined my help with thanks. Jeannine was so capable! These little jobs amused her.

The girl came out on to the platform towards us, and wanted to take back her dressing bag. I refused to allow it.

Madame Landry joined us. I took her to a seat but she refused to sit down, she was not tired. I always admired her, slim and alert at over sixty.

I had made their acquaintance at the hotel at which we had arrived together three weeks before. The old

lady, who was the widow of an Inspector of Finances, always began by keeping her distance. The chance discovery that I was the son of an officer in the army had prejudiced her in my favour. The Landrys had many connections with the army, and Colonel Dreher's name was not unknown to them. The grandmother had been able to prove, by the concurrence of various dates, that my father must have received his commission at the same time as her own brother, who had been seriously wounded in the year '70. This was reason enough for us to become very intimate in a few days. I learnt that Madame Landry had lost her son, a lieutenant in the Cuirassiers, twelve years before. He had been killed by a horse's kick and her daughter-in-law had died in childbirth a few weeks later, whereupon she undertook to bring up her two grandchildren.

Jeannine was quite young, eighteen or nineteen, I think—she refused to tell me her age, just for fun. She was tall and slim, and bright-eyed; her mouse-coloured hair curled and entangled itself in spite of all she could do. She had spent two years in England. It must have been there that she had picked up this rather offhand, or more correctly speaking, this playful manner, whose manifestations sometimes surprised her grandmother, though they rarely shocked her.

I who hold in equal abhorrence insipid or hypocritical goody-goodies and brazen coquettes, had been attracted by this frank ingenuity, this assurance which was quite innocent of all effrontery. Our friendship had been formed on the tennis court. Jeannine, who was nimble and skilful and keen, was delighted to find a worthy opponent. She challenged me anew every morning. She fought obstinately and was annoyed if I paid her compliments. In the afternoon we went

for walks, chaperoned by Madame Landry, or the little brother, and in the evening we both enjoyed our interminable discussions on the terrace where sweet-scented breezes blew.

The grandmother only put in an occasional word from her arm-chair, a little way off. Jeannine willingly avoided topical futilities. Literature, painting, music, or even politics—why not?—the occult sciences—a fruitful subject of conversation when the mysterious night is falling—she broached them all quite fearlessly. I have always had a taste for riding headlong through these preserves of metaphysics or ethics. Philosophers only venture there too gingerly, unravelling the thread of a theory. The most delightful recreation is to disport oneself there as if in conquered territory, to breast at a gallop some hilltop or other, where one breathes in draughts of pure air, whence one may cast a bold eye on life.

Jeannine was not at all apprehensive of these giddy escapades. It was an intellectual gymnastic, satisfying apparently the same taste for action and expansion which she showed in the physical sphere. And yet after one of these flights she used to feel the necessity of drawing breath and retiring upon some graceful standpoint, in the same way in which she would make a point of doing her hair and dressing for dinner, on her return from an expedition. If I tried to lure her on again, she resisted with a smile.

“No, now let's talk seriously.”

Then I would see her withdraw into a fortress built of all she definitely believed and knew, opinions, reveries, and prejudices which, though she was charmingly logical, she owed to her race and education. The best of it was that once in refuge there, in full

possession of her truths, the last thing she aimed at was to convert me. I, in my turn, was obliged to shut myself up behind ramparts; I had some all ready-made from whence I braved the world.

Oh! there was nothing very new in it, in this doctrine I had drawn from my reading and reflections, but I flattered myself that by having thought it over, I had made it my own private property. It was the eternal ego. Jeannine protested against it. She claimed that she was not at all a rebel to the requirements of logic, indeed I recognised her intellectual courage, her taste for sincerity. She had no religion to embarrass her, no faith with which she might be tempted to oppose the claims of her reason. Was she even a Catholic? No, simply a free-thinker, though she did not boast about it in order not to grieve her grandmother, who was, by the way, but a lukewarm *dévoté*. She dreamt, however, that pure self-love was not the highest end, that there were great souls, and lesser ones, that from time to time, a little of the divine might inspire our dust. . . .

Moonshine! I chaffed her: I made fun of all her would-be noble feelings; I discovered gnawing egoism in them; I raised this dreary God to a pinnacle. I went further; I was not afraid to unveil for her sometimes the depths of my nihilism. Dried up and incapable of experiencing the least emotion, I had adopted the standpoint, I told her, of considering the universe as a scene, life as a vulgar farce, denuded of rhythm and spaciousness, where each of us played a part. I did not envy that of any one else, and mine did not interest me in the least.

When I made such confessions Jeannine looked at me in silence; then she began to laugh:

"You're making fun of me!"

I denied it, guilty nevertheless of a smile which belied me. But, in my inmost conscience, I knew only too well that I had not spoken in fun. This young dialectician, whom my paradoxes amused, would have been chilled, revolted, estranged from me for ever, if she had thought that my courtesy hid nothing but this brutal scepticism, this cowardly lack of curiosity.

The train was late; Madame Landry wished to set me free:

"The time is getting on . . . if you have to go as far as your cousins' . . ."

I naturally replied that I had plenty of time before me.

"And then you want your papers!" Jeannine insinuated maliciously.

It is true that I watched for the arrival of the Paris papers every evening. Simply a matter of habit; so little news concerned me! The day before, as it happened, the post had brought me nothing. I almost suspected Jeannine of having laid hands on the mail. In any case, my vexation and my grumbles had delighted her.

An absolute child!

The train still did not arrive. Conversation languished. I started a subject likely to interest the travellers. They were going to make a short stay on the shores of Lake Lemane, a part which was strange to them, but which I said they would think they recognised, it bore so great a resemblance on the whole to the French Riviera, the neighbourhood of Cannes and Mentone, where they spent the winter. I told them of a comfortable hotel at Montreux.

Jeannine seemed preoccupied.

"We shall miss Ballaigues."

"She loves this part of the world," said her grandmother.

"I very much hope we shall be back no later than next week," continued the girl.

I teased:

"One makes up one's mind about that; and then when one is happy elsewhere . . ."

"Must I take my oath on it?"

"By Jove! That would make me decide to stay."

I reflected that with her away, Ballaigues would lose much of its charm. With the exception of Cipollina I had had nothing to do with the other guests at the hotel, foreigners for the most part. My holiday was nearly at an end. I did not doubt that at my request my director, accommodating creature that he was, would make no difficulties about extending my stay in Switzerland by a fortnight. But if the Landrys did not . . .

The girl read my thoughts.

"You know quite well," she said, "that we've arranged to go up the Dent de Vaulion."

"It will be the Pendant du Suchet."

I felt that we were going over the details of the expedition in silence. . . . I saw once more our start at midnight—we were quite a troop with my cousins the de Jougnes;—the formation of a column, the men waving lamps, the women helping themselves along with ice-axes; the long ascent enlivened by songs and chatter; we should have gone astray a hundred times but for the sure instinct of Doctor Claudel, an old inhabitant of the country; the cows in the fields, awakened by our torches and our laughter, getting up and

making their bells tinkle; the end of the ascent grown rougher, our shoes, which were unprovided with nails, slipping on the stony incline; several tumbles; a little wall skirted and then crossed. And all at once, at our side, the lights of the canton of Vaud had revealed themselves, at an immense depth, through a curtain of gloom: they might have been the lights of ships in the roads, seen from the top of a gigantic cliff. The darkness had dissipated gradually like a mist. Little by little the horizon had withdrawn to the boundaries of the world. The pure line of snowy Alps stood out against the rosy streak of dawn. . . . A few minutes of waiting, and Phoebus rose resplendent and expanded, assuming many a bizarre shape, until, full-blown and triumphant, he deigned to reflect his disk in the waters of Neufchâtel.

The picture held me captive. As Jeannine repeated, "In a week's time . . . that's agreed, isn't it?" I acquiesced; and then said whimsically:

"Who knows what may have happened in a week's time! We may be in the midst of war!"

"Oh, come, there won't be any more war!" Then suddenly grown serious:

"You don't believe it, do you?" she went on.

I affected a certain gravity:

"Well, really, the papers were horribly pessimistic the day before yesterday . . . "

"Here's the train!" the little boy interrupted.

The majestic express thundered into the station. It stopped, all the breaks creaking. The passengers got out in bad tempers, to go to the custom-house. I had the luck to find places for my party; a priest with a scared face questioned me in German:

"Revitzionne," I said.

"*Ya, ya.*"

He hurled himself into the corridor with his hands full of packages.

Having settled themselves in, the ladies thanked me. A particular gentleness distinguished Jeannine's tone; she announced once more that we should soon meet again; besides, whatever happened, couldn't we agree to exchange . . . postcards? I vowed myself charmed by the idea, and took note of a double address at Cape d'Antibes and at St. Mandé.

It would soon be time to start. I left the carriage and went and leant on the door where the window had been let down.

We had no more to say to each other. I wished the train would get under way.

Jeannine pulled a roguish face:

"We are keeping you standing there . . . when your papers have just arrived . . ."

I had not time to retort with a joke. She corrected:

"No, I've teased you enough! I don't want you to have unpleasant recollections of me . . ."

"Don't you worry," I said, smiling; "the recollections are charming."

The train started off, without a whistle. The girl held out her gloved hand to me through the window; I seized it; she gave mine a fleeting squeeze. André waved his hat, Madame Landry bowed. I walked along beside the carriage for a few yards, and nodded a last farewell.

CHAPTER II

A YOUNG MAN OF 1914

"HELLO! the Paris papers not come yet?"

"Just what I was saying to these gentlemen."

"You don't know when they ought to get here?"

"We know nothing about it, sir."

"Have you any left from last night . . .?"

The saleswoman looked through the rows. .

"Not a single one, sir."

I left the station, thinking what a sell! I had hardly gone a hundred yards before I heard myself called.

"Halloa there! Signor Dreher!"

I turned round:

"Oh! It's you!"

"I say, pretty bad, the news, what!"

"Really, let's hear it?"

"I've just glanced through the *Tribune de Lausanne*. Berlin announces that war is imminent; Austria is mobilising; they say we're going to do the same thing."

"No?"

I was dumbfounded for a moment; then, "Oh come! You'll see that affairs will settle themselves yet."

He shook his head:

"It's quite true; nobody wants to fight. What

about you, would it convey anything to you to go and get your skin punctured?"

I shrugged my shoulders:

"Those are all journalists' tales! As copy is scarce in summer, they start rumours of tension, of possible rupture, at this season, every year. . . ."

"Suppose it should be serious, this time . . .?"

"Nonsense! Can you see the French and Germans breaking each other's heads . . . for Serbia?"

We followed the dusty road, ascending from Bal-laigues; then in the high path to La Ferrière, I persuaded my companion to bear me company on the way to Jougne.

Cipollina was the only Frenchman of my age whom I had met at the hotel. He was a dark-haired youth, slight and elegant, with refined features, but a crooked nose, a blemish which, according to Jeannine, gave him an expression of incredible falseness. The ladies had not allowed him to meddle with them at all; the cold manner in which they had acknowledged his greetings sometimes made me ill at ease, as I was a friend of his.

A friend! Well, hardly. But for Laquarrière I had no intimate friend, and no wish for any; I made use of Cipollina to fill up the intervals when convention forbade my intruding upon the Landrys.

His society, moreover, was not devoid of interest. He had travelled so much, rubbed up against so many people, seen so many things. Having entered, at the age of fourteen, a big silk firm managed by one of his uncles, whose counting houses were to be found all over the world, he had been successively a sojourner in very varied latitudes, from Colombo to Boston, from Rio Janeiro to Yokohama. An intelligent observer, he owed to his wanderings and to his early contact

with the different races of merchants, a dry and caustic turn of mind not unakin to my own. Thence sprang our speedy understanding, which resembled real harmony, without either of us feeling much liking or esteem for the other. As cynics we agreed in our scornful verdicts on others and on ourselves. I must say that he did not flatter himself that he was in any way an intellectual. Each time I sketched some generalisation, or laid the foundations of a system, he escaped me, sneering:

“Oh, that’s literature.”

Then, irritated, I inwardly dubbed him a “counter-jumper.”

“Have you been to see the Landrys off?” he asked abruptly.

“Yes.”

“Shall you see them again in Paris?”

“Before that perhaps. They expect to come back here.”

“I thought you were going to leave?”

“I don’t know now. That will depend!”

He gave a little laugh which annoyed me.

“Oh, so things are getting on?”

“What’s getting on?”

“Your schemes.”

“What schemes?”

“To do with the girl of course.”

I did not deign to seem vexed, and put on a joking tone.

“My dear fellow, after all I’ve said to you on that subject!”

“It’s possible to change one’s mind.”

“No. It would never even enter my head to change my mind about that.”

I summed up, in a few words, one of my favourite theses: marriage in our state of civilisation is an absurdity; it would be ridiculous to chain oneself for the rest of one's life to a woman—and such a woman, a girl, a creature still in germ, who had revealed nothing of her secret. It would certainly need an artlessness to which I was no longer susceptible, or a faculty for enthusiasm still more extinct in me. Each time a friend told me of his happy engagement I gazed at him in astonishment as at a being fallen from another planet. I concluded:

“This little Landry girl is right enough to flirt with in the holidays! She's not displeasing or stupid, but I beg you to believe that there is nothing, and never will be anything between us. . . .”

Had I convinced him. He continued after a moment's silence.

“They say . . . she's well off!”

“That doesn't tempt me either.”

He protested:

“My dear chap, you're very much like the rest of the world!”

I shrugged my shoulders and assured him that I was perfectly happy.

“No ambitions?”

“None.”

At his look of unbelief I set myself to sing the praises of the dilettante's life I was leading. Some question he asked led me to go into certain details to illustrate the way in which everything had always gone well with me.

I had not drifted for long when my legal studies were over. An old family friend, the manager of the Abyssinian Railway Company, had asked me to become his

private secretary. I accepted the post. Another had soon fallen vacant, that of General Secretary. Suggested as a stop-gap, I had acquitted myself to everyone's satisfaction. I was good at interviewing visitors, and wrote with a certain amount of style. My appointment was confirmed. The business was a sound one, when the time for exploitation came, it would be excellent. I had put some capital into it. I had not much work, only four hours a day to put in. I earned ample to live on. What more could I have wished for?

Cipollina slyly urged me to enumerate what he called my positive joys. I demurred, none too good-naturedly.

"We have so few tastes in common."

But, privately, I invoked my customary amusements: dinner in a restaurant on the boulevards, where I used to meet Laquarrière: it was there that we exchanged our stock of ill-natured sallies: then there would be bridge, poker, or billiards: and often a theatre, though it did not appeal to us much; from time to time a boxing match, or on Sunday, in the Parc des Princes, a sensational football tie. These last shows held the most interest for me. They reminded me of the still recent time when I myself excelled in these games, and I still continued, though somewhat irregularly, to frequent a school of physical culture.

I had scratched sentiment out of my life once and for all. Paris offers an inexhaustible fund of sensual attractions to those possessed of time and money. I had both, but I dreaded nothing so much as being tied to one person, and as I also detested the flat period of preliminary gallantries, I came to content myself with a wise and banal voluptuousness. More restricted

still was the balance-sheet of family obligations and satisfactions. I would not have missed dining with my father on Sunday evening. At long intervals I wrote a few lines on a card to my married brother, an officer at St. Mihiel.

I have spoken of my dilettantism: the word gratified my vanity and was just, in the main, as certain artistic tendencies distinguished me from the herd of vulgar pleasure-seekers. I read a great deal. I bought novels and philosophies, and had a weakness for pretty editions. I made a point of being well up in matters concerning painting and music. I owned some admirable eighteenth-century prints, a small series by Daumier, an oil-painting by Pissarro. I vaguely cherished the hope of making a sort of collection of which my friends would one day be jealous. That was all. I might ransack my mind indefinitely but I should not find a possibility of joy beyond these few instances.

Oh! this reckoning. I had made it so often, anxious to ascertain what I loved, and what I was worth. I generally congratulated myself on the fact that an equal balance was maintained between the desires and pleasures. Why did everything taste so flat to-day, I thought. What beauty is incarnate to me? What virtue worthy of existence? What was I good for? Might I not have been eliminated without loss to others or even to myself?

This impression did not last long. I smiled. What was I worrying about? To proclaim oneself happy was to be happy. I could do it. I was never anything but an object of envy. A doubt crossed my mind, however. Certain moralists, I thought, consider life bearable only when supported by some passion. I only know of two: Love? With all her train of folly

and suffering. Her victims are spoken of more than all else. Real good fortune to be emancipated from it. Ambition? Is not this insatiable by its very nature? There are so few chief parts, and all great destinies go hand-in-hand with an assurance which I lacked . . . and then, did I not appreciate the highest pinnacle of fortune at its paltry worth! Did not true wisdom lie in admitting that one is nothing but a man lost in the mass of men, to order one's life so as to glide in peace through this indifferent term, lacking a morrow; without cherishing a thousand longings above one's state, or naively spurring oneself to sterile enthusiasms?

I pondered over these familiar reflections for my comfort. To my surprise the shadow of melancholy which had hovered over my head did not dissipate so easily. I had difficulty in picturing to myself without bitterness and fatigue my life to come, similar to millions of others, void of deep sorrows as of sublime joys, this dreary life which in ten years or in forty would end in solitude, sickness, and suffering, in the clutches of that cursed enemy, Boredom, whose first treacherous onslaught I thought I could feel. . . .

We had just crossed the frontier, and were skirting some meagre plantations of firs hanging to the ridge. My companion had begun to talk to me of Japan: he never allowed himself to be carried away by his enthusiasm but he admired this warlike and trading nation, at last recovered after the necessary trial, gifted with a colossal power of expansion, and who, one of these days would take Indo-China from us at a move. He added:

"My dear fellow, the prestige of France in the Far East has declined to such an extent that in order to

do business we have to pose as an English firm. Out there I called myself Smith."

I noted this detail with interest as a sign of our decadence.

CHAPTER III

BELLS

Now on our left at the bottom of the widened valley lay La Ferrière, grouped coquettishly round the tall chimney of a factory, whence escaped slowly-swelling volumes of smoke; the slender Jougninaz meandered ribbon-like among the grasses, slipping towards the neighbouring Orbe. On the side of the opposite slope, often lost to view in the zone of bushes and brushwood, the railway and the winding road, embracing each rocky contour, descended from the summit of the Col. Up above, the huge grey wall of the Mont d'Or rose in a peak, whose ridges stood out clearly against a pale blue sky; a scarcely perceptible cross marked the crest of the mountain. In olden days Mandrin and his bands used to come back into France by night by giddy pathways along this rampart; any one who stumbled was fair game for the wolves at the bottom.

Midday had been roasting; but the height, and the approach of evening, brought coolness; not a trace of mist on the mountain tops; everything was quietness and purity.

The road had just taken a turn. Jougne came into view, a vision which always enchanted me: the houses in the village, brand new, dazzlingly white, or a light vermilion, contrasted with the stalwart old grey church

overhanging a high fortress. One imagined that the place must have been unparalleled in the command afforded over the only two big valleys which for ten miles round cut through the rugged chain of the Jura.

Cipollina suddenly stood still and put his hand on my shoulder:

“Just listen!”

Straining my ears in the direction of the village, I listened intently.

“Well! What’s up?” I said. “The bells?”

“Yes, the bells. . . . What are they ringing for there?”

A gentle breeze had got up, and bore with it the call of the bronze; it was a sinister throbbing, hurried and unequal; I had a feeling that there was neither a peal of joy bells, nor the dismal tolling of the knell. We went on for a few steps. Now, more powerful and sonorous, with three jerky notes repeated at short intervals, the wild peal of alarm filled all the valley.

“The tocsin!” said Cipollina.

“Well?”

“When do they ring the tocsin?”

“In case of fire, I suppose.”

“Do you see any trace of fire?”

With the same circular glance, we took in our surroundings.

Two miles of verdant valley, lay unfolded before us; not a puff of smoke, save the column of the factory, and the steam from a descending train.

Cipollina muttered:

“Don’t they also sound the tocsin in case of . . . mobilisation?”

“Oh! Steady on!”

“What do we know about it!” he exclaimed.

There was a short silence, then I said:

"We shall find out at Jougne. Are you coming?"

"No, I'm going back."

"Aren't you curious about it?"

"I've no reason for going down there."

I looked him in the face. He met my gaze quite comfortably; but the twist in his nose struck me.

"Well, then, till we meet again!" I said to him.

"You'll come back to the hotel this evening?"

"Why of course."

"Yes, of course."

While hurrying towards Jougne, I tried to recall as much as I could the events of the last few days. It was not much. A month ago, at the beginning of my holidays, there had been the Grand Duke Ferdinand's assassination; it seemed a tragic incident and nothing more. A famous law-suit had diverted attention from it. Last Saturday, a sensational coup; a startling awakening: Austria's ultimatum to Serbia couched in terms very different from the usual courtesy shown in diplomatic notes. Relaxation had come during the following days, at least as far as I could see. The small State was giving in; councils of prudence from St. Petersburg had, without doubt, been received at Belgrade; everything seemed to be going to calm down; though the decision was to be referred to the arbitration of the Great Powers. But since, since! . . . How stupid it was that my papers should have failed me just these two days! To-day's not arriving! In seventy-two hours the world moves! What had Cipollina said? The whole of Europe in arms! A fact more novel than alarming. I suddenly brought to mind certain articles with pessimistic undercurrents. Cer-

tain coincidences occurred to me: the campaign for armaments, that belonged to last week; like the socialistic call to make a stand against war . . . and the Government away! And England's difficulties! Supposing that, having considered all this "*They*" had judged the moment propitious?

No. I smothered my agitation. We had come through so many of these critical times: Algeciras, Agadir, Saverne, Lunéville, Nancy. . . . The little Landry girl was right, we should have no more war, it was too terrible, too risky!

The bells had stopped ringing their tumultuous peal, I attributed to their silence the virtue of an appeasement. I even smiled. I mocked at my fears. Oh, come now! The War, the Great War! Would it be likely to break out in such a way!

I had reached the bottom of the valley. On my way I leaned over the Jouginaz, which had dwindled. It was the trout season! I would suggest a little fishing to my cousin one of these days.

I thoughtlessly began to climb the sudden rise of the mountain. When I had reached the summit in a perspiration, I threw a friendly glance, by way of greeting, at the Aiguillon de Baume, and on the right at the bald summit of the Suchet, which we had reached the other night. I stopped to breathe for a moment. I should have smoothed my hair, and wiped the dust off my forehead if I had known I was to meet my pretty cousin Germaine, at her people's house, but she had rejoined her husband, a captain at Belfort, not long before.

A few minutes later I passed through the railings. There was no one in the shade of the elders. I crossed the courtyard, and began to climb the stairs.

My cousin's silhouette appeared on the landing above.

"Who's there? Is it you, Michel?"

"How are you?" I cried gaily.

"Have you heard?" she called to me.

"Heard what?"

"War is declared."

"No!"

A mist enfolded me. I managed to get up to the top by holding on to the banisters. On the landing I said mechanically:

"What? what did you say?"

She pushed me into the drawing-room.

"Go in, go in. Your cousin will tell you all about it."

Left alone for a minute I considered the well-known furniture in a dazed way; the piano with the open score of Rigoletto, the arm-chairs in loose covers, the two big couches, the two greenish screens . . . I sought a new aspect of it all; I childishly reminded myself that I must remember that the things were in a like state when war was declared.

My cousin, the doctor, a sturdy mountaineer, tall and highly coloured, came in and quietly held out his hand to me.

"Well, there we are!" he said.

I got nothing but a few concise particulars out of him; ever since the morning they had realised that things were going from bad to worse, the "Pontissalien" usually so guarded ended its leading article by a very clearly stated warning that we must be prepared for anything. Our frontier had been violated, communications cut off. Our custom-house officers at Petit-Croix had been shot at last night. Negotiations had

continued, however. As a matter of fact the official telegram, which had arrived on the stroke of five o'clock contained only the seven words:

“Sunday. August 2nd.

First day of Mobilisation.”

“What do you say to going to the Town Hall?” suggested the doctor.

I agreed, as meekly as one intoxicated. We went out. We had only a step or two to go.

CHAPTER IV

A MOUNTAIN VILLAGE, THE SAME EVENING

THE telegram from the Prefecture was posted up at the door. It was still daylight, I lingered to gaze at it. My cousin took me by the arm.

"I say, come along in."

There was no one there but Alfred Lecomte, the town clerk, a still youthful peasant of a thoughtful cast of countenance, and in a corner, the deputy mayor, an infirm old man who kept in the background.

"Well, what the deuce are you doing, Alfred?" said the doctor.

The other had got up, his pen behind his ear.

"Good heavens, man!" continued my cousin, "can't you realise that there's anything to be done?"

"What should there be?"

"What should there be? You must send word first to La Ferrière and Tarins!"

Lecomte tossed his head: "Send word! That would mean a nice lot of running about! They've had the bells rung: it is up to the people to come and find out what it is about."

My cousin began to get angry:

"You idiot, Alfred. How do you imagine they'll suspect anything of the kind! You must send Machurot to them."

He was the local policeman.

"He'll be having a drink."

"At Tronquière's?"

"Probably."

A boy, who stuck his nose in, was sent to look for him. My cousin undertook to draw up the proclamation destined for the neighbouring populace.

He dashed it down without any scratchings out, and gave it to me to run through.

"Excellent!" I exclaimed.

Somewhat pretentious, it had a great effect on Alfred and the old deputy. The boy brought Machurot back, and it was put into his hands.

The old dog was as drunk as a pig, but he declaimed it, all the same, head-in-air, scanning all the syllables but breathing out of time. They traced a detailed route on the paper, for him, and let him loose in the growing dusk.

The news had spread. Peasants began to come for information on their way home from the fields. They arrived with lagging footsteps.

"It's true we're going to fight?"

"Rather!"

Alfred took them to see the telegram, lit up now by a lantern.

"Just look at that and see if it's nonsense!"

"When do we leave."

"That depends. You've only got to look at your record book."

Those who had gone on to get it at home, pulled it out, opened it, and consulted the number.

"The third day," they read; or "the second"; territorials, "the eleventh."

"You'll get there too late, old chap!"

A Mountain Village, Same Evening 27

The upshot was that each one seemed overjoyed or heart-broken, according to whether he would have time to get his hay in or not.

Very few remarks; and anyhow not a single grumble. My cousin, who forced himself to keep up his cheery tone, met with no echo. He could only drag a few disconnected sentences out of the broken-down old deputy.

The visitors did not linger, but soon turned on their heels, their wooden pipes in their mouths.

Lecomte bustled and fussed, full of the importance of his part. As for me I took part in it all as the stranger I was, and incapable of realising the tragic element afloat in the air.

When the doctor wanted to go in, I urged him to take a turn with me through the village streets. I expected at last to come upon some unexpected, and unusual demonstration. . . . the evening of mobilisation! The great evening, by Jove! I was disillusioned, we met no one in the poorly lit streets. In the little schoolyard the teacher's son was making figures of eight on his bicycle; further on through an open window, we saw a lot of farm hands sitting round a table, limp and taciturn, gorging themselves with soup. And the usual frequenters of Tronquière's "pub" were sipping their *verre de verte* in silence.

My cousin did not rise much in answer to my short sentences. However, when I asked him:

"Are they patriotic about here?"

"Very," he assured me. "You'll soon see!"

I objected diffidently.

"At first sight. . . ."

"Well?"

"There's rather a lack of enthusiasm."

"Enthusiasm? It was not wanting in the year '70! They didn't know then what a real war was. They've learnt. In '71 in January, we saw what was left of Bourbaki's army pass by, dying of hunger and cold in the snow. We know what beaten men are, and that we must not be of their number. They aren't going out of light-heartedness, but they'll go on till death!"

My place was laid. We dined. The doctor was grave and silent, and I feeble and dull. My cousin was the only one to talk, and she overflowed with lukewarm lamentations. What bad-luck that Geneviève should have gone back to Belfort just a week before. Would she be able to come back?

I reassured her by saying that women and children would certainly be ejected. But her son-in-law, the Captain? His fate did not seem to worry her much. I remarked that he was in the first line, much exposed.

"Of course!" she sighed. "Hadn't I told them often enough to try not to stay in the East!"

The doctor interposed, declaring that it was the most honourable position for a soldier. Julien would most certainly not complain!

He added, turning to me:

"Your brother runs an even greater risk!"

My brother Victor! I felt rather ashamed of not having thought of him! A lieutenant in the infantry at St. Mihiel, ten miles from the frontier. Hadn't I heard that he could be mobilised in three quarters of an hour? This detail which I put before them, drew forth shrieks from my cousin. I tried to picture Victor as parted from his wife and his little children, perhaps

A Mountain Village, Same Evening 29

since this afternoon, perhaps for the last few days, to go towards the dark unknown. . . . Seated at this table, in front of an appetising dish of morels, I had difficulty in convincing myself of the grim reality.

In order to rouse myself, I declared:

"In three days, it will be my turn."

"To do what?" asked my cousin.

"Rejoin my regiment, of course!"

"What! Are you going too?"

She had a dazed look. The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course he's going! At the age of twenty-seven! My dear Mathilde, you don't seem to have any idea. . . ."

She acknowledged frankly that she did indeed understand nothing. . . . But when I had told her again that in three days' time I was going to report myself at F——, whence I should be sent to fight, she seemed thunder-struck, poor soul! I should never have suspected her of being so fond of me; she had known me ever since I was quite tiny, and I was the son of her poor lost Blanche, one of her own people, a blood relation, and dearer to her than her son-in-law, I could see . . . she began to bewail herself, cursing the relentless fate against our family. The doctor had to cut it short, a little sharply:

"Look here, don't discourage the boy!"

I was not displeased when she stopped talking; too much attention always worried me; moreover it occurred to me—a false, but unpleasant impression—that I was making an unfair appeal to her compassion.

During dessert, while my uncle was uncorking a bottle of wine, I studied the railway-guide. The 6:50 train ought to get me to Paris at four o'clock, but

the time-tables would probably all be upset. It would be wiser to be at the station from six o'clock onwards, and to wait.

My cousin sympathised:

"You'll have to be up very early."

We drank to the health of our relations with much feeling; examining myself stealthily in a looking-glass, I decided—I was a little heated—that I already had a martial air about me.

"Are you a corporal, anyhow?" the doctor asked me.

"Sergeant."

Half-past eight struck, I got up.

"Oh! how I should like to pack for you!" said my cousin.

We embraced. They entrusted me with many friendly messages for my father, whom they had not seen for ten years, and went with me as far as the railings, where the last farewells were said.

As I went away, I heard the doctor murmur:

"The beginning of the bad times."

And my cousin:

"Poor boy!"

These words bore me company. I thought involuntarily that in this separation from people who loved me, and perhaps the only ones who loved me, there must be something deep and heartrending, of which I was still unconscious, but which one day would fill me with emotion.

CHAPTER V

A MEDITATION AT THE WINDOW

I CLAMBERED down the side of the mountain, and then walked quickly along the road to Ballaigues. The night was serene. A dog was howling in the valley, a harsh bark which sufficed to hold my attention.

It was only when I had got back on to Swiss territory that I thought of the risk I had run of being arrested as a deserter.

I had cut through the woods. Dead branches cracked under my feet. I crushed a glow worm. At last I made out the hotel lights. My heart bounded when I reached it, I don't know what I expected.

There was nobody in the corner of the terrace where we generally gossiped, the Landrys and I. I bowed to the old Portuguese ladies who were enjoying the evening air. From the hall I saw the English installed phlegmatically at their poker table in the smoking-room. A solemn and inscrutable waiter passed me, carrying a tea tray. Nothing abnormal struck me. I wondered whether they knew.

I went down on to the terrace again. A silhouette rose from the shadows. By the light of his cigar, I recognised Cipollina.

"Well!" he called to me, "what do you say to that?"

"I can't believe it yet!"

In so saying I ingeniously betrayed my dominant feeling.

He offered me a cigarette, and said quickly:

"Shall we take a turn?"

I was going to agree to doing so when I suddenly thought of my preparations; and I was seized with the vain idea of guarding against future fatigue.

"Thanks," I said, "I've got my packing to do. What about you?"

I understood him to say he had finished. I continued:

"Are you going by my train?"

"What train?"

"The 6:50, if it still exists. The Paris Express."

He was silent.

"Are you going to rejoin soon?"

He shook his head abruptly and exclaimed:

"Not I!"

I looked at him; I understood. He went on in an aggressive tone:

"You won't catch me going to be knocked on the head, when I've the luck to be out of it! And you, are you itching for it, Dreher?"

"Yes, I'm going back," I said.

"Well, well! And I thought you so emancipated!"

He went on ironically. He only had one skin, and he meant to stick to it; he hadn't the slightest desire to fight for Serbia, as I was saying just now. . . . No, it was astounding! A nice mess our diplomatists must have made of it! . . . All the more so since, as we suspected nothing, we naturally were not ready! And so it meant catastrophe! . . . We were going to get a licking!

He ended by taking me by the arm:

"Come along and have a smoke and then we can chat."

"No," I said decidedly. "I'm going up again."

"In that case, my dear fellow, good-bye."

"*Au revoir.*"

"Oh! there's not much chance of our ever meeting again!"

Was it the effect of these banal remarks? Hardly had I regained my room and gone to lean my elbows on the rail of the balcony than I felt as if crushed by the revelation I had witnessed during the last three hours.

A formidable adventure was in the making and my part as a finite being was to consider it as a spectator. The things I was saying just now, without attaching any definite meaning to them appeared to me clothed suddenly in their imperious significance: Yes, in three days I should be at F—, in four my rifle and my outfit would have been handed over to me, shortly afterwards I should be entrained. . . . Here the vision lost its clearness; only a few concise pictures rose from a sombre haze: marches and counter marches, the bleeding feet, the exhaustion, the cold, the filthy promiscuousness, nothing to eat; and then one day the battle; not an entertaining engagement like those during manoeuvres, interrupted towards 11 A.M. by the bugle call, but the grim struggle, glued to the ground advancing foot by foot, day after day and night after night, against an invisible opponent, desperate, superior in discipline and in numbers, armed with frightful machines . . . the whistle of the bullet, the explosion of the shells. . . ! And one morning, in some hole or corner, an obscure and crushing death.

Presentiments were unknown to me: I suddenly believed in them. I saw myself killed, it was all over and done with my career as a man, this life I had been pleased to order so ingenuously. The horror of the annihilation so near at hand suffocated me.

I breathed the scented night air like a drowning man. At my feet was the dark terrace, a servant had just cut off the electricity. I heard the gravel crunching beneath a footstep. A shadow ascended the steps. It must be Cipollina.

His words echoed in my ears, his "Not much!" I was suddenly seized with fury against him—the coward!—a fury which was almost immediately turned against myself. Was it not his conduct that was logical. He refused to sacrifice himself. He coldly applied his Doctrine, our Doctrine, of calm selfishness. I fumed to see this shopkeeper, this table d'hôte philosopher, superior in practical wisdom to myself, when I had ruminated my system for so long, and looked at it from every point of view.

Why did I not imitate him? I upbraided myself harshly on my lack of rational courage. For since I was the enemy of sentimental chimeras! . . . What could I believe in? Nothing, nothing! Duty, Honour, the Ideal? They were so many hollow sounds to me. Patriotism? No word was more foreign to me. I too was a Citizen of the World! The chauvinism of my father, a native of Lorraine, and an old soldier, seemed to me out-of-date, an ill-omened and ridiculous passion; in that, as in everything else, I was so little his son. As far back as I could remember, I had never espoused his craze for war and revenge. In former days when we used to spend our holidays at Ebermenil, some miles from the frontier, nothing irritated me so much

when quite a child, as to feel how immovable the people were in their wild enmity against their neighbour. They never opened their mouths without making insolent or dangerous remarks; they never dreamt, it appeared, except of bringing back a cursed year. Why this rancour? As if it ought not to have satisfied them to continue to be Frenchmen themselves? What did it matter to them that their brothers from the neighbouring villages should have changed their name. Were the former more unhappy than the latter? My handbooks of history were full of exchanges of this kind, carried out without any one rebelling against them.

Grown older, I had only strengthened, by reasoning, my instinctive indifference in regard to the fate of the Lost Provinces. I had gone one better; what a high doctrine, I thought, was that of Internationalism! And convenient, too. I should have declared myself its adherent quite openly, but for my systematic slackness, my fear of committing myself. The result was that I took an interest in those theories which denied that there was any meaning in the term Fatherland.

I happened to find in them the subject for some daring developments, with which during even the last few days, I had taken a delight in upsetting Jeannine Landry's convictions.

Germany, especially, inspired me with no enmity; on the contrary, I had a weakness for the genius of her philosophers and musicians. Two years ago I had travelled in the country, and had stayed at Iéna for three weeks with one of my friends, a lecturer at the university. We had wandered together in the Thuringian forests, and slept, rolled in our cloaks, at the top of the Schnee-Kopf. How could one fail to be won

over by those glorious surroundings. As for the men over there . . . I had pleasant recollections of a few merry shooting friends, one named Kroemer among others. If they had not appealed to me as a whole, did any one by any chance imagine that I cherished the slightest sympathy for the millions of beings—ugly, vain, and unintelligent—who made up the great majority of the nation which was mine by birth. In Paris it was true that, within a restricted circle, I experienced certain satisfactions which I should hardly have relished anywhere else. But, when finally analysed, even these delights did not amount to very much! They comprised the one real benefit which I owed to my position as a Frenchman. In order to assure the continuation of this advantage—and what, after all, did it amount to—it was agreed that I should sacrifice my one irretrievable treasure, my life.

You can see with what a decision I seemed to be faced, but oddly enough my revolt continued to be purely theoretical and abstract. Not for an instant did it seem to me possible or within my power to take the line simply of ignoring the fact that my country was mobilising. I saw myself as the conscious victim of a superior fatality; I knew that I should take the 6:50 train next day, that I should be at the Chanzy barracks before ten o'clock on Tuesday!

But that did not prevent me from cursing at fate. Tired of grumbling at myself, I consigned to perdition the instigators of the war. Spite blinded me; I kept on revolving most bitter, and I must admit, most unjust reflections. Yes, as Cipollina had said; what an accumulation of mistakes! For a long while back. It was all very well to say that Germany wanted war; was preparing for it! During the last few years per-

haps. But had there not been a time when she had made advances to us? We had always refused to make friends, and had kept our eyes fixed stolidly on the Frankfort Treaty in which we pretended to see the one and only source of all our ills.

Our policy, of late, had become more captious. There had been a series of clumsy manifestos, an awakening, which one could not shut one's eyes to, of the old swashbuckling, nationalistic, and chauvinistic spirit. What countless occurrences, speeches, and articles had gone towards the making of a dangerous state of exaltation. Anything rather than a humiliating peace! Anything? That meant war. Oh well, they'd got it. They'd soon see!

What exasperated me more than anything was to think of all those who had done or allowed everything to be done, the ministers, ambassadors, and delegates who in history would bear a part, however insignificant, in the terrible responsibility. They were all, or nearly all, over the age limit; they need have no fear for their skins; it was the others, me and men of my generation, the youth between twenty and thirty years of age, whom, with high-flown words and light hearts, they would send to the slaughter!

But it was necessary to pack. I fulfilled this task with such mechanical precision that it calmed me. When I had finished I went out on to the balcony again in my shirt sleeves.

A crescent moon had just risen. A green mountain-side opposite me, at the other side of the cutting which terminated, I imagined, in the ravaged gorges of the Orbe, was bathed in her light. Vaguely phosphorescent fields lay soaked in a milky whiteness. Spreading

brown forests quivered softly. Half-way up fires were shining, the factory and station at Brassus. I admired the bold sweep and the contour of the Dent de Vaullion on the right. Farther on in the distance a series of mountain ridges, forming a circle, were indicated, bluish and pale beneath the halo.

My brow was cooling again. In the contemplation of this veiled and unreal scene my thoughts insensibly freed themselves of sinister obsessions.

What made me call to mind a very insignificant incident in this day fertile in shocks, that moment on the road when I had passed in review the joys for which I lived? The obscure feeling of distress which had made me stop talking recaptured me. I again experienced the sensation that everything was dismal, but at the same time was there not something which might be called an unexpected hope rising within me? What hope? I caught it, and questioned it. Was it not of new days when I should perhaps shake myself free of the torpor where I languished?

Halloa! I jeered. Was I too lending a hand in the resurrection of the warlike instinct legitimate in the son of the soldier who was in the charge at Rezonville, in the grandson of the man who had commanded a regiment at Magenta? No, no: I acquitted myself of that; such wild intoxication was quite alien to me. The most I might admit was that my eyes were fixed on the future with a greater interest, that curiosity made my resignation easier.

I let my imagination run away with me. Turning successively towards the two horizons, I imagined I saw, beyond the mountains, the vastness of the two hostile territories where since to-night so many forces were being lavished in the elaboration of the battles

A Meditation at the Window 39

where they would devour each other to-morrow; a gigantic sheaf of hatred and lust, but also of devotion and heroism which had just burst into flame!

Midnight struck. My exaltation dwindled; at all events, I was not sorry, I thought, to have been equal to the emergency if only for a moment.

I went down to give the hall-porter orders to wake me at five o'clock, he was to have my bill ready, and I should expect a cab to be there for my luggage. In crossing the lounge I came upon the three Englishmen who were leaving the card-room. We had never exchanged a word, or a nod; I thought them ignorant of our language. I was going straight past them, when the one who was walking in front, a big, fair man, who looked an athlete in his smoking-jacket, stopped right in front of me.

"Good luck to your country, sir," he said.

"Thank you."

I mechanically held out my hand, which he shook hard.

His two companions did likewise.

I went upstairs again, feeling rather touched. Up there my scepticism got the upper hand again. I thought.

Will they stick to us, I wonder.

An amusing idea occurred to me, of sending a post-card to the little Landry girl to tell her of the incident. I took up a pen, but while doing so it struck me that the girl would not see anything very funny about it. Sentimentalise . . . no thanks! I scrawled a few lines for her without mentioning the occurrence.

BOOK II

August 2nd-3rd

CHAPTER VI

I GO BACK BY TRAIN

It is easy to imagine the influx of Frenchmen, hurrying in from ten miles round, at Vallorbes station that morning, the second of August; the procession of omnibuses, the piles of trunks, the pack of distracted families overrunning the waiting-rooms, crowding round the ticket offices, demanding directions and details which no one could possibly have given them.

The express, which turned up at the usual time, was taken by storm. When would it get to Paris? They would guarantee nothing as to that.

I had the luck to find myself a place as eighth in a second-class carriage. Opposite me two old maids never stopped talking, in a whisper, probably about everything on earth but the news of the day. A *bourgeois* couple with a crew of sulky children argued for hours about opening the windows.

There was a minute inspection of the baggage at the Pontarlier custom-house. Nothing occurred. We got back into the train. The speed was fast until Dôle; there we slowed down noticeably.

There was a long stop at Dijon. The station already seemed to be under military occupation. Very few civilians on the platforms, but behind the gates, the murmur of a crowd come for news, kept back by sentries with fixed bayonets.

The news-seller, despoiled of her wares, was hawking round nothing but some illustrated comic and sporting papers; I bought two or three from her, but did not read them.

We left Dijon towards eleven o'clock. From there onwards, mad rushes, sudden stoppages, and breathless progress, alternated.

Laroche at last.

There, the Paris papers had just arrived. We threw ourselves upon them. I managed to get one. I was surrounded at once. People squashed up against me to get at least a glimpse of the stop-press and head lines. I was not very accommodating about exhibiting my paper, and I soon succeeded in shaking them off, and getting back to my carriage.

The train started off again.

Standing up in the corridor, I admit that I read and re-read the leading article without skipping a single line.

I expected a good leader and was not disappointed. I relished the indispensable paragraph on the past and future of France, on the sacred union in face of the enemy.

My neighbour nudged me with his elbow.

"Oh! Isn't it just what everyone is thinking?"

"Yes, yes."

Exact information was what I really thirsted for. I remember two headlines: "*To-morrow?*" and "*A Day at the Quai d'Orsay.*" In a prominent position the President's Proclamation. The article was a

success: the obvious thing to say. "Mobilisation is not war." But there was no mistaking it; the spark had caught, the fire was already crackling.

I learnt the news of the preceding days, including the assassination of Jaurès, merely from allusions—to me they were so many claps of thunder!

One main point stood out: Germany's declaration of war on Russia. Like a shot France was dragged in, automatically. A well-laid scheme on the part of the Wilhelmstrasse. The odious article from the *Cologne Gazette* which was reproduced everywhere had been a final eye-opener.

One amusing detail: Hervé asking to be allowed to go! Another rather shocked me: Telegrams from various places on "the Enthusiasm in the Provinces. . . ." I had just come from the provinces!

I had finished reading. It was evident that my neighbour was dying to talk. Feeling charitably disposed I gave him an opening. In five minutes I had learnt all there was to know about his antecedents, his family, and his profession. He had passed his legal examinations, taking the degree of licentiate, and was the son of a lawyer. He was coming back from Autun, the home of his maternal grandfather. What times we were living through, sir! The day before when the official telegram had arrived, ah, what enthusiasm there had been; I ought to have seen the factory hands rushing out shouting: "To the front!"

"You saw them then?"

"Oh no, I didn't!"

He had read this description in the *Mémorial d'Autun*.

He asked me childish questions about our chances, and the schemes at headquarters.

I sententiously put forward the idea of an offensive in Alsace. He jumped at it.

"To take the offensive. Yes, yes. That was the only thing to be done."

He had not many brains. It did not take him three minutes to regain the Lost Provinces.

He confided in me that he too was a noncommissioned officer in the reserves, attached to the 74th Rouens. He was to rejoin the next day. He asked my name, and gave me his address. He offered me his friendship as a brother-in-arms. I was tempted to be touched by the thought that here was one of the young men of my own age, who would fight, and perhaps fall, at my side on the plains of Lorraine. But my scepticism and coldness offered too strong a resistance, and when I heard him exclaim: "If we've got to be killed, we've got to be, and that's all about it!" my indignation was aroused. Sincere! He was sincere enough; a puppet who came near to being a hero! There were such beings, incapable of reasoning for themselves, always ready to set out to fight for never mind which side. Yesterday for the Church. To-day for the State. To-morrow for some social chimera. If it had only been themselves they disposed of! . . . But they were in the majority, it was they who oppressed us.

Much irritated, I wickedly said to myself: "Let him sell his life cheaply! It certainly isn't worth much!"

I escaped from him and gained a distant door, whither he did not follow me.

Our journey was drawing to an end. The train had put on speed. With shrieks of pride and whirling smoke and sparks, our powerful engine dragged us towards the City, the huge magnet which, at this time was rallying so many friendly forces. The intoxication of this attrac-

tion made itself felt twenty kilometres away. The six-fold rails gleamed in the sun on the sand embankments. We thundered along, without slackening our speed, through the suburb stations, whose names were slurred by our haste. Crowds of people huddled together on the platforms, gazed at us in respectful silence. Maisons-Alfort, Charenton. We went ahead of ten trains which were crawling along the side lines, and speeding up their connecting-rods in vain. Smoke darkened the air. We passed by high houses, grimy with soot, whose windows, where the washing was put out to dry overhung our cutting. Then came the metallic crash of the double bridge flung across the rivers where they join,—the moat outside the walls—Paris! We were in Paris!

I was thrilled with excitement. Capital of the civilised world, head of a great nation at war! From here had leaped out the old call to arms! Leaning out, I tried to distinguish beyond the line of railway-carriages, sidings and signal-boxes, in the streets skirting the line, in the avenues we crossed on heavy iron bridges, the residents, and passers-by, all those who had just lived through such rousing hours here.

I was impatient to mingle with them.

CHAPTER VII

PARIS, AT FIRST SIGHT

RUE D'ASSAS. My *concierge* came out when she heard the taxi draw up.

"We were expecting you, Mr. Dreher; I was sayin' as much to my 'usband, only a minute ago."

The man himself appeared. In his capacity as handyman he hoisted my heavy trunk on to his shoulder, as if it were a plaything.

"And when may you be going, Mr. Dreher?"

"The day after to-morrow, and what about you?"

"A week on Wednesday."

"So there we are!" I said.

"There we are! as you say, sir. It was bound to finish like this."

My char-woman had had the happy inspiration of coming to do some cleaning that morning, so I found my flat in order and well aired. Having made a hasty toilet, I thought of various important errands.

I had kept my taxi, luckily for me as the motor-omnibuses were no longer running.

It was five o'clock. I went to the Rue des Beaux-Arts first. My father was not at home, so I left word with the old parlour-maid that I would be there for dinner that evening.

Many wants led me to a big shop. Nothing safer I

thought than to buy one's outfit oneself. I was lucky enough to find what I wanted quickly, even in the boot line, where a crowd of people were being fitted.

Having finished my shopping, I called to my chauffeur:

"Rue du Helder!"

At the head office of the "Abyssinian Railway Company" my director welcomed me with open arms:

"My dear fellow! You're going? Oh, I thought as much! Rather rough on us! Duroty is going too. The best men, of course! I wonder whether we shan't have to shut up shop."

"And out there? How's the work getting on there?"

"Oh, well . . . it's just got to go on. The workmen are natives. The engineers are the trouble. . . . Of course I ought to have had more sense and taken Englishmen!"

I went straight from there to the bank. It was shut. They were not seeing any one. Luckily Forgues, my stockbroker, hooked me as I was parleying in the waiting-room, and made me come in.

He seemed to have collapsed completely; there must be bad news, I could drag nothing out of him, as he sat there in his mole skin arm-chair, but vague allusions, and an estimate, which was by the way entirely incorrect, of the financial resources of the two parties concerned. Germany had no reserve of gold. If we could hold out for two or three months!

"Are you going to fight?" I asked.

"Oh, no, no! Since the Agadir business, you know, . . . my wife's one idea has been to get me put on half-pay. I thought it awful rot, but as my heart is a bit weak . . . my doctor has given me a certificate; I've been to see a surgeon-major; no difficulties were

made about it. . . . And by Jove it's lucky for me now! And what about you? You're not going, I suppose.

"I beg your pardon!"

He seemed surprised. He had just seen several of his clients—Well, I was the first. . . .

Feeling irritated, I cut him short with: "Can you let me have a certain sum on account?"

"Oh, but there's the moratorium. . . ."

Somewhat embarrassed, he entered into explanations which I listened to with raised eyebrows:

"To an old client like myself!"

After renewed hesitation, he made up his mind: Well, let's see, would you need a large sum?

"No, let's say forty pounds."

"Not more than that?"

"A little gold, if possible."

I had had time, in two hours, to notice how scarce the yellow metal was.

Forgues raised his hands: That was impossible, quite impossible! I wouldn't get it anywhere! Nobody would part with it!

I persisted. He was a good sort at the bottom! Was it my (unique !!) position as a man about to be mobilised, which melted him? He ended by handing over fifteen louis to me.

I thanked him warmly and we shook hands.

"And mind you don't get killed!"

He spoke of it lightly. My gratitude ceased promptly.

I suddenly bore him a desperate grudge for having coolly evaded the great blood tax.

I put in an hour, dawdling about. I bought an evening paper. There was nothing startling in it

unless it was M. de Schoen's last visit to the Quai d'Orsay, but not even the most inveterate optimists could any longer suggest that there was the faintest glimmer of hope. One article signed "A Military Attaché" interested me. It was a study on the probable forced attack, dear to the German heart, through Belgium, towards the source of the Oise. It explained how the enemy, if successful in getting so far, would be only ten days' march from Paris.

I walked on absent-mindedly, crumpling the paper in my hand. Ten days' march. It looked rather as if they were preparing the public for what was to come! We had so little protection, it was true, against the danger which threatened to swoop down upon us from the North. Was the City destined, a few weeks hence, to undergo the horrors and humiliation of a new siege. How quickly my mind was overwhelmed by baleful visions born of the Fatal Year.

I pulled myself up. Steady on! We were only just beginning.

Never mind! The resemblance between yesterday and to-day obtruded itself upon my mind. A comparison which ought to have been all in favour of the present. There had been no lack of speeches and articles extolling the revival of our energies for some years past. Was it real or imaginary? What an opportunity it was to audit that? Not in connection with myself. I deliberately set myself aside. But in the great bulk of people; it was on them that our fate hung.

Well, I was only partially reassured on this point.

I think I should have preferred to see a tide of humanity sweeping along the avenues as in July of the

year '70; to a rasping accompaniment of "Berlin! ! To Berlin!"

Cheek, of course, but heroic cheek, and proof of the warmness of their hearts.

While to-day! People were wandering about, plenty of them, it's true, standing in front of the posters, theatres, and picture palaces, thronging the open-air cafés, but you might have thought they had come out on this summer evening solely for the sake of enjoying a breath of the mild air. They talked quietly among themselves as they walked up and down, or read the papers with an air of distrustful wisdom, perfectly well aware that they were not being told everything. One might have imagined oneself back in the days of the floods of 1910, when the Parisian public would learn with apparent indifference that such and such a quarter of their city was threatened with extinction.

An irritating attitude in a crowd, at a time when—now or never—it should have been moved, uplifted, carried away by great inspirations. Who would believe that I asked myself in all seriousness if France must be despaired of, if our country had not come to such a pass that there was nothing to be done but to strike her off the map of Europe, the victim as Hellas was of yore, of her excess of philosophy. . . .? This idea was distasteful to me. . . . But still! If there was nothing to be done but to resign ourselves! We should go and start life again elsewhere, in some free country like America. . . . Those who got out alive! I still hoped to be among them.

The thought also crossed my mind that we were taking part in a renewal of the hardy and unassuming, the gay and tranquil qualities, which were the attributes of our race. . . . We had not always been the most

highly-strung people of the world; during the forty years of peace we had recaptured our gifts; peace-lovers by nature and only entering the lists under provocation, and in our own defence, perhaps we were to astonish the universe anew by our valiance.

Why not? The hypothesis appealed to my sense of vanity. Oh well, we should see, we should see!

Should I have retained any misgivings if my walk had led me to the outskirts of the Gare de L'Est, where the people of Paris were beginning to set such a sublime example of steadfastness, and dignity?

CHAPTER VIII

MY FATHER

SEVEN o'clock struck. I did not forget that I was dining in the Rue des Beaux-Arts, and hurried towards the left bank of the river. On the way I wondered what had dictated this visit? Was it filial affection? Not at all. I was simply acting in accordance with a banal convention.

My father had never taken any interest in me, even when quite tiny. As my health, which was poor at that time, had prevented his thinking me fit to be made into a soldier, I had been practically non-existent in his eyes. Victor, my elder by two years, was everything to him. He had him educated at La Flèche, though it cost him a lot, in order to steep him, from his childhood, in military ideal and discipline.

It is the dream of all fathers to be continued in their sons. Colonel Dreher only wished to live over again in the hope of Revenge. I have already said that he fought like a demon in the year '70. When a young subaltern in the Guards, he had been in the charge at St. Privat, had had his horse killed under him, and had got a bullet through his arm. Captured at Metz, and taken on into Westphalia, he had found a way of escaping, of reaching Holland, and of rallying Faidherbe's army in time to get a splinter of shell in his thigh at

Bapaume. The news of the armistice had found him in hospital, that of the treaty had disgusted him. He who burned to go on fighting, who felt no fatigue! The renunciation of the two Provinces had been a bitter blow, and the counter-blows more bitter still.

As a Lorrain of Lunéville, he had quite a number of near relations in the neighbourhood of Sarrebourg, many of whom had not the courage to ruin themselves by throwing their lot in with their true fatherland. These people were dead for him, needless to say. But these repeated misfortunes had done not a little to contribute to the growing gloom of his character. He had rejoined his regiment and had been quartered successively at Joigny, Moulins, and Rouen where he had married, and lastly at Tours, where most of my childhood was spent. Decorated for distinguished service in the field, a superb leader of men, he would have been made a general but for his obstinate, though discreet opposition to a government timorous enough to put up with such peace terms.

My mother, the one person I might really have loved, had died just as I attained my fourteenth birthday. I had finished growing up under the paternal tutelage. For a long time I succeeded in persuading myself that the Colonel felt heaven knows what secret fondness for me. Then with the audacity of youth, intoxicated by the first lucid glance I had cast on life, I admitted to myself that I had been duped. I was of very little account in this old man's eyes. Let him content himself with my deference, as I did with his correction!

There was no intimacy between us. As I grew up, our relations came to be stamped with rather a cold courtesy, like that between strangers thrown together by chance, for the space of a voyage. My father never

asked me about my ambitions, once only about my immediate prospects; it was after I had taken my second degree. He neither approved nor found fault with my intentions.

Having been placed on the retired list just at this point he came to live in Paris. I never knew if it was to facilitate my studies.

Three years went by, then my year of military service. On leaving the regiment I felt the need of a separate establishment. No objections were raised. My share of my mother's fortune already enabled me to support myself, and my post in the Abyssinian Railway Company soon brought me affluence. I dined with my father every Sunday, as I said before. We exchanged opinions on the events of the week, without in any way committing ourselves. He gave me news of Victor's household.

On leaving St. Cyr, my brother, having chosen to go into the Colonial infantry, had been sent to Rochefort to await his commission; and then he went and fell in love with a girl he met at the "Cercle Militaire" ball. At the request of her family, he had obtained leave to exchange into the home forces. He had got married. My father had not blamed him in the least for giving up a life of warlike adventure.

Full of his one idea, the old soldier preferred to see his son on the frontier ready for the day, which he always hoped was close at hand, when war would break out.

My brother! To think that when we were brought up together, before he left for La Flèche, we were fond of each other! . . . Little by little had come detachment and loss of affection. . . . To-day we were strangers to each other. Our intercourse was confined

to the exchange of a few post cards at New Year and Easter. My sister-in-law, Geneviève, a pleasant, insignificant little creature, had been friendly to me at the beginning; I had spent three days with them at St. Mihiel not long ago, at her request. I was bored to tears. In future it would be quite enough for me to see them during the short stays they made in the Rue des Beaux-Arts, twice a year. I went when invited. My father seemed to have grown young again. He cheered up and chatted, and played with his grandchildren whom he was mad about. He adored his daughter-in-law too, and paid her endless little attentions. It caused me no embarrassment or jealousy to be present during these effusions.

My father got up from his chair and came to meet me. He was drawn up to his full height. His face beamed as I had expected.

"You're pleased?" I said.

"Yes. Oh, yes. I had given up all hope of seeing this!"

The soup was brought in. I urged him to talk. He did not wait to be asked twice. He had a good word for several of our politicians—an astounding thing for him!—for the abettors of the "*loi de 3 ans*," for the President of the Republic, for the President of the Council. This mobilisation order was a good answer to the German measures! Tit for tat! The rogues, we had our eye on them! Hour by hour we knew all they were plotting and planning! . . . My father declared that he had gone over completely to the Government. At such a time all differences must be sunk. It struck me that he had gleaned these doctrines from his newspaper. I admired the eternal authority of common-

places. I suddenly saw him searching his pockets. He had received a letter from St. Mihiel this morning, as on every morning since the outbreak of the crisis. He handed it to me.

"It's from Geneviève."

"Has Victor gone?"

"He went four days ago."

Mobilisation had not been expected over there. It was on Thursday, the 30th, in the middle of the night that Geneviève, standing at her window, her head framed by those of her two little children, had seen her husband march away proudly, with raised sword, at the head of his company. This vision intoxicated my father. It did not leave me indifferent. And, like him, I approved of the steadfast, confident tone of the young wife's letter. As to leaving St. Mihiel, she wrote, such a thought had never entered their heads!

"She's quite right," said my father; "the Prussians will never get there; they'll soon be sent back again. You know we've already got seven hundred thousand men on the frontier."

He added:

"And Victor in the first line."

His first-born, the re-incarnation of his imperious youth! The old man's bellicose imagination rode along at his side. He explained to me how, since the other day, he followed him hour by hour; he saw him, having taken up his position on a spur of Mont-Secq, watching the Woivre where the cavalry would soon be engaged. Though not very familiar with the topography of this region, I understood the rôle assigned to the covering forces, to hold on at all costs, in front of the Côtes de Meuse even if attacked by forces ten

times superior in number, while the concentration went on behind the hills.

"A dangerous task, that!"

"Yes," said my father. "Most of them will stay there."

I examined him, furtively; his massive Lorrain's head, the ruddy face beneath the white hair, the square jaw, the nose with a heavy, decided bridge. Sturdy and tall like an old oak, his only complaint at the age of sixty-seven was an occasional attack of rheumatism. I might have been gazing at the portrait of some ancestor. Was he not indeed an anachronism in our century. Taciturn and reserved, but upright, frank, and sound all through, the hero of an exclusive faith, of a single hate and a single love, he treated with scorn all human contingencies in the exaltation of his passion. It is true that he loved my brother as much as if he had been his only son. And yet if he were to go and get killed in one of the first engagements, I could foresee that the old man would weep, gnawing at his grey moustache, but in this sorrow he would taste the joy of sacrifice. If France were victorious he would consider success cheap at the price. Oh! how complete was the contrast between us, I thought. I supple, and of medium height, owing the triumph over my constitutional delicacy only to the tardy pursuit of sports. I, smiling and polite as a matter of form, but a cynic and dissembler; I who believed in nothing, loved and hated nothing!

Led away by a natural inclination, he conjured up his recollections of the other war: deeds of courage and cruelty, stories breathing blood and powder, all ending in violence and murder. It woke him up and en-

raptured him to breathe the fumes of the slaughters of yesterday and to-day.

My demeanour and head tossings seemed to encourage him. Oh! if only he could have read my thoughts. If he had guessed my detestation of all fighting. My horror of physical suffering, the only true suffering in my eyes, my longing for repose even without honour, my indifference respecting my threatened country, the wish which I caught myself forming—I had got as far as that!—to see our mobilisation hindered, or even prevented altogether, the red flag hoisted, and our defeat proclaimed before I had run any risk!

My father, happily, had neither the taste nor the gift for probing people's minds. His beliefs dazzled him with such shining proof that he could not understand any one challenging them. He could not have attributed thoughts like mine to any one but the scum of the nation, degenerates, debased by sloth, vice, and alcohol. Strange that I should be of his blood.

The pudding was served. Mélanie handed round a chestnut cream. My father led the conversation back to Victor. I discerned the great longing in the old man's heart to see his son—the apple of his eye—again, and to do him honour.

“He won't be long now before he gets his company.”

I had never taken umbrage at the paternal solicitude. Why should I suddenly to-day consider as strange an affection so much out of proportion. . . . ? You might have thought my brother was the only one who was going to risk his life. . . . And what about me? I ventured to draw attention to the fact.

“You'll be only in the second line.”

“I beg your pardon! Our division is attached to the 4th Corps on the active list.”

"When do you rejoin?"

"The day after to-morrow."

Then he deigned to ask me certain questions, this one among others:

"How about your foot-gear?"

I explained that the regulation boots hurt me.

"That's a pity! A man with sensitive feet never makes a good soldier."

He went on:

"You'll remember you're a Lorrain!"

But at that I came near to shaking my head. A Lorrain? Never. More likely of the other race, my mother's. Or more likely still, of none at all. There were too many strains in me; none of them succeeded in getting the upper hand. I was the nameless product of concluding epochs.

Time was getting on. I excused myself from staying late, and no efforts were made to keep me.

"You'll be busy to-morrow?"

"All day long, unfortunately."

"But still I'll try to look in to say good-bye" I added, "but I daren't make any promises."

I had quite made up my mind to do nothing of the sort.

"Come and dine if you can."

I had got as far as the hall. Mélanie turned on the light for us.

I thought, as I buttoned my gloves, how well adapted the situation would have been for the stage. The son leaving for the Front. The great Farewell scene. Even a second-rate actor could have drawn tears from the public in it. . . . I, as actor and spectator combined, experienced not the faintest trace of emotion. Nor, to a certainty, did my father. So much the better!

In that case we were sure to escape being ridiculous. Why did it again occur to me that if it had been Victor . . . ?

"Well, good-bye, Father." I said.

"Good-bye, Michel."

He held out his broad wrinkled hand to me. To my surprise, it was shaking.

I had opened the door part way, and was on the point of going out, when he drew me back. I suddenly saw his face, with its white beard, bending over me. He kissed me. It was, I think, the first time for ten years.

"Fight well!"

"I promise you I will."

I went quickly down the steps feeling quite staggered. Hardly had I reached the bottom, when I recovered myself. I asked myself, mockingly, whether I had not been affected by the traditional emotion?

A little, I admitted.

But I had the decency not to scoff at it openly.

CHAPTER IX

MY FRIEND

My char-woman woke me by bringing me the papers, which I read in bed.

To think that it had not come yet! It was true that all intercourse had been broken off between Berlin and St. Petersburg, and even on our frontier there had already been some deaths, the Samain brothers and the Curé de Moineville. Provocations and outrages were multiplying and increasing in severity. Our forces nevertheless were still kept back two miles from the frontier. M. de Schoën was still about. They were talking!

The papers did not cover more than a page now, and were quickly read. They all contained the same incoherent *communiqués* and the rare telegrams which were allowed by the censor (already!) to trickle through.

Details in plenty on the manifestations in Paris and in the provinces. The same old story! In one of them there was a technical article headed "The Defence of Nancy." This title interested me. I, like most other people, felt so certain that this town was doomed; at the mercy of the first masterly move.

What baffled me was the placid, docile attitude of my friends the socialists. How little one heard of

them! It was true that the censor . . . but never mind! Jaurès, as he was dying, had left them the order to go on, and they were going on. Closed ranks and obedience and confidence were the orders of the day. Arguments were left for another time! and on my honour, it was very fine!

My purchases of the preceding day were delivered. I asked the boy who brought them, if he was going to fight.

“Of course!”

He was a cheery soul. He liked the idea of knocking the Bosches on the head; he had no great opinion of them chaps. And then besides that, it was worth takin' a bit o' trouble to get a breath of fresh air, for him whose week had been spent in running errands, and his Sundays as assistant in a picture palace, for how long. . . ? Blowed if it wasn't five blooming years—yes, ever since he was a nipper of seventeen—he'd never set eyes on the country. . . .

Were there many like that, I wondered.

When I tried on my boots they seemed to me to squeeze me. Was there a pad in the heel. I put in my hand but brought nothing out. I should have to squash the counter to make it more pliable.

No business called me out-of-doors. My list of errands had been exhausted the day before. What friend should I go to see. They would all be running about the town in the excitement and emotion of departures and farewells. I would go and dine with Laquarrière this evening, that would be enough for me. I had made up my mind that the streets would look just as commonplace as they had yesterday, and I should get all the information I wanted from the newspapers.

I stayed quietly at home, looking through my papers and reading over some old letters. The idea of making my will occurred to me. . . . But, when once I was gone, what would it matter to me?

My friends in the regiment would have laughed if they had known to what I had been tempted to consecrate my day, ever since I woke up. I went and fished up a book in a grey cover from the bottom of my book-case; my old *Handbook for Non-Commissioned Officers*.

I had not opened the book since the beginning of my military service, not even when I had been put in command of a section. It was quite possible, to-day, in view of the deficiency of officers, that I should be given a commission.

So I lunched at home. I got through almost the whole of the book; for instance the "Section in Action," and "Field Operations," "Alimentation," and "Hygiene," such chapters as I agreed with in letter and in spirit. But with what disdain did I skip everything concerning peace time or even garrison duty.

Towards evening, somebody rang the bell: Laquarrière.

I greeted him with, "A good idea, old fellow! I was coming round to say good-bye."

"Oh yes, of course. You're off!" he said.

He had escaped his military service, thanks to being slightly short-sighted, and to the fact that he could demand a good deal of interest.

He was my only intimate. We had never been parted during our school days at the *lycée* at Tours. We had come up to Paris in the same year to begin our legal studies. The Bar had attracted him; he seemed

to be going to succeed there; he had been accepted when still quite young as secretary to the "Conférence." We met almost every evening; we dined and then idled together; our tastes agreed. Together we had forged a philosophy, drawn from various sources, which fulfilled all our requirements. How completely our ideas harmonised in our wholesale scorn for people and things, and for ourselves, our hatred of appearances and of Sentiment! We were candid, almost to the point of brutality, in our dealings with each other. Courtesy and consideration were well enough for fools. I took a delight in the thought that our surly bearing towards each other hid a firm friendship.

"You stay here, I suppose! Your usual luck!"

He found nothing to say to me but:

"Bah! Some will come back, after all!"

"To think," I continued, "that in a fortnight I may be under fire!"

"Yes. I can see you at it!"

"How do you think I shall get on?"

"Not brilliantly!"

"What do you know about it?"

"I know you."

I protested:

"That's idiotic! I'm sure there's a special grace given to uphold you!"

He conceded:

"That's true enough. One must be utterly dazed and allow oneself to be driven, without knowing what one is doing or where one is going."

This opinion shocked me.

"You exaggerate! I admit that may be so for the soldiers, wretched beasts of burden, . . . but when

once you are an N. C. O., and have responsibility of some kind. . . .”

“One more chance of losing your head.”

I denied it. I, for instance, absorbed by the anxiety of leading my men, was sure partially to forget the danger. . . .

“Bah! Once there, morale is the only thing that counts.”

“Well?”

“You won’t get me to believe. . . .”

I hesitated, then I said:

“After all. If I am going to fight, it only depended on me . . . I was in Switzerland. . . .”

He sneered:

“No humbugging! You came back for reasons which had nothing at all to do with patriotism! Simply because if you had not done so, your position, your cash, and your little mode of living, would all have gone overboard at one fell blow.”

His words reminded me of the vague hopes which had suggested themselves to me two days before.

“Listen! I certainly won’t hide from you the fact that I envy you. I should be delighted to stay under shelter like you. And yet . . . shall I own up to a certain kind of curiosity? War? This War. The greatest of all! It seems to me that it’s worth experiencing. What an amazing opportunity for accumulating memories, and also of refreshing oneself, of drawing near to nature!”

He exploded. Good Heavens! Did I think it would have the faintest interest for me! Was not the peculiarity of modern campaign a terrible tedium? You never see the enemy. You spend days in shoveling ground about. The operations are on such a vast

scale that the majors and colonels themselves often do not follow them in the least.

“And you’re counting on it for distraction and refreshment. Poor old chap! It would have been well worth making yourself scarce. Well, you’re in for it now. What do you want? Regeneration by war! Back to the land! I’m quite content! If you consider that your life was becoming too monotonous, go and amuse yourself by getting a piece of shrapnel into you, over yonder towards Epinal! That will wake you up a bit!”

He had beaten me. I contented myself with assuming a jeering expression, in order to let him think I had been pulling his leg.

CHAPTER X

EVENING, ON THE BOULEVARDS

It was time to go and dine. I bought a paper directly we got out. Laquarrière exclaimed:

“What thirst for news!”

“I admit it.”

“And you expect to find it in the papers!”

It was a fact that I searched in vain for any definite news concerning the serious military and diplomatic situations. Always the same system of brief, touched-up telegrams. One would so much have liked to be certain of England's attitude. However, the theory of Italian neutrality seemed to be confirmed; one good point!

“What will the flying machines do?” I asked suddenly.

The subject interested me. I had visions of raids and fantastic combats *à la* Wells.

“Nothing at all!” Laquarrière broke in. “They haven't a ghost of a chance against Zeppelins.”

He embarked on the praises of these Dreadnoughts of the air, one of which had gone two thousand kilometres without a stop, a few months before.

“I shouldn't be surprised to see them over Paris to-night!”

I tossed my head. He continued:

"Besides, as regards aeroplanes, you mustn't imagine that we're in any way superior to them in that line. They've beaten all our records lately, distance and height."

It was only one detail among many. He did not hide from me the fact that he had an extremely poor opinion of our state of preparation. Cipollina's tone and mistrust were repeated in him. I ventured to remark:

"Our troops in the East are tip-top."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps, but you are hardly up to the same form."

What could one say without losing one's temper, a thing I was not in the least anxious to do.

After leaving the restaurant, we took a turn on the boulevards, where the increasing crowd was gathering. Lost in the streams of people, alternately bumped into or elbowed, it was impossible to keep up a connected conversation. So much the better. I was quite willing to forget the presence of my companion.

I was haunted by the thought that it was my last evening of liberty. . . .; after to-morrow my uniform would impose upon me the strictest restraint. I was making use of the final respite. I inhaled without displeasure the dusty air laden with the smells of acetylene gas and human emanations.

A lot of the shop windows had their shutters up and looked dismal, and looking up one could make out insolent German inscriptions. Angry *bourgeois* muttered as they passed, clenching their fists. People were talking of nothing but the hasty dismissals of the day before. The other shops flaunted their dazzling electric lights. The luminous sky-signs, intermit-

tent and hallucinating, unrolled flamboyant zigzags and blazing coils. An unreal scene, well suited to the agitation of the hour! Soon it would be quenched and blotted out and dismal. . . . Paris was lavishing her final brilliance. What gaps were to be made by to-morrow's call in this multitude promenading their quivering city with such pride! I tried to read his secret on the face of each man of an eligible age for military service. Was he going to rejoin? and I felt inclined to shout to him:

"I'm going, you know; I'm one of you!"

My glance rested approvingly on the sturdy-looking fellows whose martial air under their *képis* I could well imagine. With their heads held high and their hands behind their backs, most of them looked about them with a superlatively good-natured expression, quite innocent of swagger.

Laquarrière shouted down my ear:

"You all look as if you were starting out for a day's shooting!"

Oh! so I looked like the rest? Well, I was not sorry for it!

My companion persuaded me to finish up the evening in a music hall.

The place was full. Lots of people were treating themselves to an evening's amusement before the coming horrors. There was a sketch, followed by several acrobatic turns. The audience was enthusiastic. But I was struck, nevertheless, by the coldness with which "the eccentric" Fergusson, usually the idol of the public, was received.

Laquarrière enlightened me by remarking:

"That will teach England to buck up a bit!"

We laughed together over the childishness of crowds,

for this "eccentric" said to be a Londoner, had perhaps been born at Javel. The three Alkenkirch brothers, the Dresden tight-rope walkers, had also disappeared from the programme.

Laquarrière whispered:

"They would have been torn to pieces! Just look at the brutes."

I had to echo him, but I thought to myself that if ever there had been a time when Chauvinism was excusable. . . .

The show came to an end. There was not the usual rush for the doors when the curtain fell on the final scene of the little *revue*.

"The best part is still to come!" whispered my companion.

A murmur ran through the crowd, and swelled into "*La Marseillaise! La Marseillaise!*"

Laquarrière nudged me with his elbow.

"Now we're off!"

He assured me that the orchestra had had orders to delay striking up in order to give the audience time to work itself up.

True enough the uproar was increasing. The audience were on their feet, waving their sticks, and violently demanding:

"*La Marseillaise!*"

Laquarrière called my attention to the courtesans in the promenade, who, delighting in an evening which promised to be fruitful, stood on tiptoe leaning on the arms of their chance-met companions, and stamping and shouting: "*La Marseillaise!*"

The conductor's bâton gave three short taps. On the sudden abatement of the tumult, rose the superb rhythm of the opening notes,—a virile introduction.

All the men had bared their heads simultaneously.
No; not all.

"Hats off!" shouted someone behind us.

For whom was the order meant? For Laquarrière, I could see. He shrugged his shoulders to show that it pleased him to thwart such a fool. But the moment was ill-chosen. Other voices, already grown threatening, repeated:

"Hats off! Hats off!"

He gave way, smiling scornfully.

The orchestra excelled themselves. At the opening of the refrain the general attention was caught and held by the imperative call of the repeated high note, and the feelings of the audience carried away by the well-marked rhythm of the melody. A war-like jollity was abroad. I swear I had a momentary vision of risen troops hurling themselves in serried ranks against the hostile masses. I shivered. I was entering into communion with the multitude. . . .

Laquarrière leant towards me and made some remark which I did not catch, but which I had to acknowledge with a smile. . . . My trance was over, I listened untroubled to the crash of the brasses, as it grew in intensity and rose headlong to the heights, to die away in wild flourishes. Then from two thousand throats there rose a clamour which rolled like thunder round the roof. A new thrill ran through me; I was just going to shout . . . when Laquarrière seized me by the arm.

"Let's be off!"

"Nice patriots!" he mocked; "all these fine fellows who came to gaze at a pretty pair of legs."

That restored things to their proper proportions.

"But what about you? It shook you up a bit, eh?"

I denied it obstinately.

He walked back with me. We talked of nothing but the most ordinary things on the way. I was pre-occupied, almost melted. Why? . . . good heavens! because in a few minutes I was going to part from the only friend of my childhood, from the only fellow being who really knew me. . . .

Should we ever see each other again?

In spite of my instinctive horror of any display of feeling, I could not help imagining that some heartfelt word would pass between us, some brotherly embrace draw us closer to each other . . . and the prospect moved me.

Laquarrière soon settled the matter.

When we got to my door, he stopped suddenly and held out his hand saying:

“Well, so long, old chap! Hope your pack will weigh lightly on you!”

It just hit the nail on the head.

“So long, old chap!” I repeated.

He went off, swinging his stick.

Oh well, it was quite natural! We were nothing to each other. Nobody was anything to any one. . . .
What idle fancies I had woven!

BOOK III

August 4th-9th

CHAPTER XI

THE FIRST STAGE

MONTPARNASSE station—cold and grey on this dull August morning. Groups of people, each setting out with its escort, might be seen streaming in from all the neighbouring turnings towards the square which the last tooting trams were crossing. They formed but one swarm, scattered and renewed without ceasing. There was nothing like these huge quivering masses, the preoccupation of all Paris, magnificent in their emotion and courage, who succeeded each other at the Gare de L'Est. Poor women, young and old looking almost equally faded, were carrying old handkerchiefs containing the possessions of their husbands and sons, —working-men in broad belts. Beside them, fathers wearing decorations and beautifully dressed mothers and sisters surrounded young *bourgeois* dragging heavy kit-bags. All these people were holding back their tears and smiling, saying that they would see each other again!

As for me, I was alone. I was leaving nothing behind me. So much the better; I was glad of it. I

was starting on the great adventure, with an entirely open mind, in the rôle of an on-looker.

The two staircases were barricaded. Only one entrance was open, reserved for soldiers carrying their railway warrants in their hands. I followed the stream. We climbed the slope. From the road below passers-by made us signs of encouragement. I noted the quick sprightly steps of most of my companions. Mine were rather slower but firm and decided nevertheless. I unconsciously adopted the gait of a man who means to see the thing through.

I should, I thought, see nearly all my contemporaries in the regiment turning up at this meeting-place. I rejoiced at the thought of spying out, on each one's forehead, the reflection of his private feelings.

The comrades of my twenty-first year! There is no age at which a life lived in common is responsible for forming more attachments than this one, but I was among those who had made the fewest friends during those ten months. I had had a room to myself in town, while many of them agreed to share with two or three others. I was considered a bore; a report which I had started, a state of affairs which I exploited, in order to escape endless fatigues. Beyond that I was neither liked nor disliked. They mistrusted my coldly mystifying disposition, they envied me the calm insolence with which I defied my non-commissioned officers. When the time came for separation, and the exchange of addresses, I did as the others did; without any illusions; nobody would bother to look me up, I felt sure. I was mistaken. Someone did come: Guillaumin.

He was a grotesquely ugly chap, with a great thick red nose, short-sighted eyes, and a hoarse voice. A

chatter-box, energetic and obliging, loved and chaffed by everyone. What should he do but get the idea into his head of keeping in touch with all those he had considered good fellows down there! And he had almost succeeded in doing so. He was the living index which one need only consult for information on the fate of all the old lot in our platoon. He dropped in to see me from time to time, on his way from the office where he vegetated as a clerk. We dined together on those evenings, and for him, I deserted Laquarrière, who, having caught sight of him one day, did not spare me his sarcasms on my grotesque "regimental friend."

I arrived in the station. It was swarming with reservists leaving to rejoin their regiment. Not many faces that I recognised. One already felt lost, and groups were formed instinctively.

The first one I shook hands with was Laraque, the handsome Laraque, whose rosy shaven face and marked features, prepossessing and imperious at the same time, gave him simultaneously the air of a Roman Emperor or of a ballad prince.

"Well, there we are!" he said. "Killing, what?"

"Killing, oh rather. Got your ticket?"

"What do you imagine! I think they might give us a free trip!"

His tone showed me where I was. I could see that it was going to be the proper thing to take everything as a joke. Not to show one's feelings in any way . . . Good! We should see how long that would last! I should have my revenge as an on-looker.

Faron joined us, the son of the professor at the Sorbonne. He himself was a barrister, thin, energetic,

and impenetrable. He buried himself in his newspapers. Then Holveck small and witty. He had just started a bank, with a branch in New York. Ladmiraut, an old Normalien with a puffy face and thick, hanging lips, an erudite pedant and a simple soul who used to be the picked target for all the practical jokes. Big Denais, the finished type of the don't-care-a-blow-for-any-one shover. Fortin, who had taken a degree in history, a lecturer and public speaker, not long returned from Germany, and already in search of a public.

It was a very lively scene. All meeting and recognising and calling to one another.

"Helloa Miquel, is that you?"

"What a nice surprise!"

"No! it must be a put-up job!"

They were all here, all going to fight. But with what will, I could not yet decide.

Our train, the 7:16, was almost due. Laraque dragged me away towards the platform, out of breath and purple in the face, his hat and eye-glass on one side. He wiped his damp forehead and shiny nose.

"Do you know what delayed me?"

We did not listen to his story, he realised it, and cut it short.

"And . . . what about the old lot?"

I mentioned some names and expressed my surprise at not seeing Boutet.

"What! You haven't heard about it! Poor wretch! He's been at Berck, for the last six months."

"Oh, I say . . . that's the limit," said Laraque.

He laughed, but I felt that it was only half in fun.

Guillaumin continued:

"I came across little Frémont outside."

"Oh!"

"He couldn't tear himself away from his wife."

"What, Frémont married?"

"Yes, rather, six weeks ago."

Just think of that. The idea amused me. He had been the youngest in the platoon, enlisting at the age of eighteen, though he did not look more than sixteen. He was as beardless and fresh as a girl and scared at first by the round oaths in the barrack-room . . . and now he was married!

"What's his wife like?"

"Also quite young. They're like two children! She wants to go to F—— with him."

The journey lasted just four hours.

We had scrambled into one of the "commandeered" carriages which within a few days would take us on to the scene of action.

We were gay with a gaiety in some cases spontaneous but for the most part, assented to, though neither forced nor painful. Magnificent inconsequence! And the delight of meeting again like schoolboys at the beginning of the October term.

At certain moments we touched lightly upon some subject of serious discussion. England? . . . Oh yes! England! . . . Some facetious remark soon put an end to it. Holveck turned to Guillaumin:

"You'll have to do away with your eye-glass."

"Why?"

"Because of the splinters . . . if you get a bullet in your eye!"

This sally raised a general laugh. Through the open windows our gaze roved over the country-side. It was a little depressing no doubt. This war! How

many would set eyes on this landscape again next year! . . . But let's hope for the best whatever happens. After all, it simply meant that manœuvres would last rather longer than usual! . . . This state of affairs would not last for ever; two or three months, six at the most! and it would be all over! . . . and Philoppon, the fair-haired dandy who had been brought to the station in a car by his people, already had visions of next winter, which he expected to spend as usual on the Riviera.

"I tell you what, you chaps, I shall see an extraordinary improvement in it after the war, what!"

On our arrival we went straight to the barracks.

The weather was stormy. In crossing F—— I was reminded of our former route marches. . . . Our platoon heading the battalion. The company commander gave us as guide a great lout of a sergeant who kept up a stream of invectives. All the world and his wife were at the windows. Left—Right! Left—Right! Our pace quickened going up the hill, and we had to hang on to each other in order to keep our intervals. What an effort it was, weighed down, and with the muscles of the thigh contracted, and those of the calf aching, to cover the last lap.

I called these things to mind now all the more easily because I again found myself struggling with my pack on the same ascent. I was perspiring, and already tired and depressed. And then in those days I had the buoyancy and the enthusiasm of youth, and facing these trials I used to say to myself, "It's got to be gone through!" I had the feeling that I was buying repose for the rest of my life.

What a sigh I had heaved when my time was up.

I had thought my period of physical constraint, the most trying of all, over and done with! . . . And now I had got to go through it all over again. . . . Worse even than that. The hardest part by far still awaited me! . . . How I loathed in advance the bitter hardships to come, the defilades at the double, the tramps across the ploughed fields under the crushing weight of the pack, all the cursed, humiliating, bodily subjection.

But I made a childish vow not to "overdo" things, as they say.

CHAPTER XII

NEW COMRADES AND OLD

HAVING registered my name the sergeant on duty snapped:

"The 22nd! They're in the College, Rue St. Paul."

One thing delighted me. Guillaumin was attached to the same unit. I had so often experienced his good-nature and devotion. He would be invaluable, perfect, on active service.

But what other non-coms. should we have as companions?

Directly we got to our quarters, we saw two men detach themselves from the group standing there. Two more of the old lot, two school-teachers. . . . Guillaumin whispered their names to me—Descroix, a squat, red-haired chap, with an imperial and a clumsy way of walking; and Humel, a small slight man with a thin pale face, and a rather cunning expression. We greeted one another cordially, pretending to congratulate ourselves on the lucky chance. They lost no time in addressing us in the most familiar terms, and we put on no side. Conversation soon began to lag, however, as we lacked any interests in common.

Guillaumin suddenly went off. He brought back a man named De Valpic to introduce to us. He was tall

and slim and distinguished-looking with a gentle, sad expression.

As he was already in uniform the company sergeant-major, who was passing, requisitioned him.

When he had gone, we asked Guillaumin who he was.

"Oh, you know the De Valpics—the historical ones! He is the ambassador's nephew. I met him in camp at Mailly, and he asked me to go and see him—A mansion in the Rue de Grenelle, with a courtyard of sixty yards. But quite unspoilt, a very good sort, you'll see!"

"He'd better not give himself airs here!" said Descroix.

He and Humel did not seem in the least disposed to make friends with the new-comer.

Reservists kept on arriving in an uninterrupted string, their rejoining orders in their hands.

"Here are the people we're going to get killed with," Guillaumin said. "What sort do they look?"

Beaucerons for the most part, reserved, obstinate, weather-beaten beings, who did not talk much. When they did it was with a guttural accent. I was able to identify the faces of a certain number of worthy farmers, the Simeons and Gaudéreaux whom I had noticed during my year's services. From a distance they all seemed our elders, with their scored faces, and their bodies bent and thickened by the rough work in the fields. A minority of Parisians were making four times more noise than the others. I raised my eyebrows. I had caught sight of Judsi with his queer clown's face—a bad stock—and further on, Lamalou, a huge fellow with a weakness for the fair sex, who had come back from the punishment battalions in

Africa; a good sort, but terrible when he had been drinking.

"The deuce!" I said to Guillaumin. "We've got some bad hats."

"They make the best soldiers!"

Judsi was raising roars of laughter by handing round the hat, his hat, an extraordinary object which he must have picked up for fun on the high road.

"Help a pore man!"

He humbugged: Didn't his pals agree that it was just the time to go and fetch a few kilos of red wine? Who knew whether they wouldn't have kicked the bucket by to-morrow.

He ended by collecting about four francs. He went off and came back in ten minutes' time carrying seven or eight bottles.

They made him a speech, they smacked each other on the back, they went into fits simply at the sight of him clicking his tongue or rolling his eyes.

I suddenly caught sight of someone coming towards me . . . the brick red cheeks, the flat nose, the crisp hair, and full lips exposing the receding gums . . . all these were familiar to me. The man was wearing a dirty grey suit. He held out his hairy paw to me.

"Halloa, my 'rooky'!"

The sound of his voice enabled me to place him.

"Bouillon!"

Eight years before, when I first joined, I had found him rejoicing in good conduct and efficiency badges, and acting as barrack-room orderly. The excellent fellow had at once taken me under his protection, and had seen me through the first three weeks, teaching me the rudiments of manual and platoon exercises. He was not a little proud of it. I was "his rooky."

A little later on Bouillon had got into trouble. He had been led away by Lamalou, and mixed up in some night brawl, and had lost his stripes in consequence. When I rejoined the company I had been able, without causing him any humiliation to get him attached to me as b4tman and we had both congratulated ourselves on our understanding, he because I occasionally gave him a tip to supplement his weekly three francs, I because my kit was so well cared for, from that day onwards.

I had not seen him since. The joy of having found me again lit up his face.

He said insinuatingly:

"If only you could get me into your section?"

I promised to try and arrange the matter for him shortly.

"That chap seems very much attached to you," said Guillaumin.

"Pooh! He hopes to get some money out of me!"

A quartermaster-sergeant who had re-enlisted accosted us:

"I say, you're the N. C. O.'s of the 22nd, aren't you? Come and get changed: Then you can lend a hand . . . with the men!"

We followed him to the clothing-store which had been installed in a yard.

An officer was there, a sub-lieutenant in the reserves, a young fellow with a fine head, and a long brown moustache, which he twirled mechanically. We reported ourselves to him. He timidly asked each one of us what our profession was.

"That's right!" he said approvingly; "quite right. Yes!"

There was a superb lot of regulation trousers, tunics, and great-coats.

Guillaumin marvelled at them.

"Some preparation—what!—in spite of all they say!"

We soon found what we wanted, all that is, except him, whose arms were so long as to be out of all proportion.

We laughed at his build, resembling that of a monkey.

"First-rate for bayonet work!" he retorted.

We were ready. The quarter-master brought us a dozen men.

"The first batch!"

A nice business this: these two hundred fellows to fit out! They all kept coming out of turn. And they weren't a bit easy to manage, as they did not care a rap for us! And then how nice and easy it was to find one's way about among these marks. M III, G II, E IV. . . .! A foul dust flew out of the piles of clothing which were lying about, out of the heaps of caps which had come undone. . . . And the stink of these people in their shirt sleeves! . . . Heavens! I did the best thing I could do under the circumstances, and bolted surreptitiously.

Having got over the railings I saluted a couple standing on the pavement, hand-in-hand. Little Frémont and his wife whom I thought insignificant-looking. I went on, but was not displeased at the idea of his being in the 22nd; one more pleasant comrade.

I did not reappear in quarters until evening. Guillaumin at once warned me charitably to look out! I was marked! Descroix and Humel had soon noticed my disappearance and had made no bones about reporting me. The quartermaster had stormed and raged; a regular hullabaloo!

"What does it matter!" I interrupted.

I saw, however, that there was a certain amount of danger in allowing a hostile clan to form itself at the very beginning. I went into the little room reserved for us. I found Descroix in his shirt-sleeves, and offered him a cigarette, which he accepted. Humel came back, and we joked. Neither of them uttered a word about the afternoon's occurrence.

However, the quartermaster-sergeant came to tell me, in a tone that I did not half like, that I had been warned for orderly duty at the gates.

"Who detailed me?"

"The sergeant-major."

The others were chuckling inwardly. I made the best of a bad job. All right! My turn would come in time no doubt! I was looking for the necessary equipment when a counter order arrived. The guard would be drawn entirely from the 23rd to-day.

Still better! I went out calmly, taking Guillaumin with me. Frémont had vanished. We met De Valpic:

"Are you coming to dine with us?"

He excused himself. Not this evening, he preferred to rest.

Rest after what? His refusal shocked me. If he was going to refuse to associate with us, he would have to be taken down a peg.

CHAPTER XIII

KNOCKS AND CONTACTS

EACH morning, for the next three days, we got part of our equipment. The quality of the leather goods was excellent, the arms were in first-rate order, the linen clean and of a kind to wear well. There were some details not up to the mark, the haversacks were only moderately good, most of the water-bottles leaked or smelt bad. Bouillon, however, got me all I wanted in the way of new things, and it was, thanks to him too, that the battalion cobbler deigned to put nails into my boots.

In the afternoons my only idea was to "leg it."

In theory we were not allowed out until after five o'clock; but as a matter of fact our stripes over-awed the sentry, the sergeant in charge took care not to see us on condition, of course, that we should do as much for him sometime.

Guillaumin stayed in billets for the first two days, hoping to make himself useful. I found him in a state of exasperation when I got back in the evening; they had made no use of him, nor of the men, for that matter. . . . Oh yes, I beg your pardon! They had not stopped sweeping the yard all afternoon. Then at four o'clock they had emptied a cart-load of straw out on to it, and now it was dirtier than ever!

His obsession for the time being was this: What were they waiting for? Why didn't they take us on the drill-ground? Let them teach us our trade as soldiers. To think we were going to fight to-morrow!

Through him I learnt that the text-books had lately been modified on several essential points. I enjoyed getting a rise out of him.

"Oh, what does it matter! None of the officers have an inkling of it."

He got into a great state of mind. What a shame it was to have to see such valuable material wasted. We had no leaders.

"In the 22nd anyhow!"

We were agreed on that point.

Who would have believed that our captain had not yet put in an appearance, though his arrival had been announced several times. The first lieutenant Delafosse, a middle-aged man, cold and correct, confined himself to questions of administration. As for the others, Henriot, whom we had come across on the first day, we soon placed as an elementary school-teacher. Yet another of them! Rather a refined-looking man, but his accent left much to be desired. He taught, we heard, in a village near the Meuse. He meant well no doubt, but was woefully lacking in authority and initiative. His two colleagues, Descroix and Humel, had soon monopolised him, and were hail-fellow-well-met with him. He made himself very pleasant and attentive to us, and was obviously anxious to make a good impression. When he had to give an order he seemed apologetic about it:

"I refer the matter to you . . . you know all about that as well as I do!"

Ravelli, the battalion sergeant-major, a good-look-

ing dog, who had been decorated, added his own failings to those indispensable to his calling! An insufferable bounder! Stupid and pretentious; a real bad lot. . . . He grovelled to the officers and bullied the men shamefully. He did not quite dare to attack us openly, and we could see he appreciated our powers of retaliation. But the poor *poilus* in the ranks!

It was nothing but parades and roll-calls and inspections with this low-bred cur at their heels from morning till night, an endless stream of fatigues. The tactlessness of the man! The Parisian groused. Lamalou already refused flatly to obey him; and Judsi made no bones about exclaiming, "The bloody beast, 'e'd better look out for 'isself w'en we get our ammunition."

Such were our superior officers. The trio lacked breadth of mind. Breton, the quartermaster-sergeant was acting company sergeant-major, as we had not a *pukka* one.

Three more non-commissioned officers had now been added to the company. Hourcade, a bank clerk in civil life, a dull dog, and meticulous to a fault. Belloeil, a butcher from Marais, with very high colouring,—a good sort, so obese that they had given up trying to clothe him. He declared his intention of staying behind as drill sergeant to the raw recruits. And lastly Ployoust. He was a character, this Chartres fishmonger. A fine figure of a man, a rake with the gift of the gab, he was addicted to "talking big," and did not lack a sense of humour. His bragging amused me. A gay dog, he boasted that he accepted . . . hospitality in town every night, but never two nights from the same hostess. He assured us that there was a large choice. Where on

earth? . . . Why of course among the wives of the regulars who had left on the day of mobilisation.

Guillaumin had not much taste for this class of bragging. Nor I, for that matter, but I recognised in this popular cynicism a kindred spirit to my own. And then Playoust made up to me and always liked to count me among his audience when he was playing the fool. It was no time before he had gained a singular hold over a certain set of our comrades. Were we there to be bored? He organised "manilles" in which Descroix and Humel and Hourcade took part from the beginning. Quartermaster Belloiel took a hand when wanted. Guillaumin loathed cards. As to the others they were left out of it. I was never asked to make a fourth. But I saw that it was in my own interest to remain on good terms with the whole lot. . . . There did not seem to me very much difficulty about that; . . . I had bought cigars to give away. I wasted a whole afternoon in this colourless society. Playoust was in good form that day. We kept up a cross-fire of witticisms, he and I. . . . It was up to the others to do the laughing. Everything went well!

I climbed down when Guillaumin came to me that same evening much against his will—for he hated telling tales—to give me a friendly warning.

"You look out! They can't stand you!"

"No! Is it as bad as all that?"

"Quite. It's better that you should know about it."

"What do they object to about me?"

"The way you get out of things, and shirk the tiresome jobs. They can't stand that. Directly your back was turned, just now, they exploded. A regular chorus! It's just the same every evening!"

"Descroix and Humel?" I asked scornfully.

"And Playoust too."

"Really! You don't say so!"

"He most of all!"

This gave me something to think about, when all the time I'd been looking on him as an ally! . . . I thanked Guillaumin for drawing my attention to it.

"You may be sure I stood up for you," he added.

As if I should ever have doubted it!

I examined my conscience; there was no doubt that I had been to blame on several occasions!

Thereupon I altered my plan of attack!

The next day Playoust happened to be on guard. He was obviously frightfully cut up at having to fail a particularly lovely lady. I offered to take his place. He accepted casually.

"I'll do the same for you sometime, old boy!"

"Right you are!"

In the morning I had already suggested taking charge of a fatigue party of some sort. Descroix had exclaimed:

"Nonsense, it can't be true! Dreher who never stirs a foot."

"It's about time he took his turn," said Humel.

Never mind! I quite thought I should succeed in disarming them partially.

At the same time I judged it expedient to tighten the bonds between us, the four old pupils. I busied myself about it without much success.

Frémont was the pleasant comrade he had always been. But in voice and gesture and outlook he still retained a certain something which was extraordinarily infantile, and rather took one aback. He was extremely young in mind too. A Doctor of Sci-

ence at the age of twenty-three and an honours man he took no interest in anything outside his speciality. He was particularly unresponsive on the subjects of art and philosophy which I was particularly fond of discussing.

Besides he was living in a dream. Though present at every parade, he deserved every time—as Guillaumin threatened him, with a laugh—to be reported as absent.

“Oh, these young husbands!”

He waited until the regulation time to go out, but then he lost no time in getting through the gate. His wife had come to fetch him, and they went off arm in arm. One met nobody but them in town, all evening. Why couldn't they shut themselves up? I knew they had hired a room. Yes, Guillaumin explained to me, but they did not have the use of it till eight o'clock. Poor lovers! The fact remains that their idyl, in a fair way to become the talk of the whole regiment, got on my nerves!

As for De Valpic, it must be admitted that he was rather an eccentric being. His manners were perfection. On coming into contact with him one felt that he was unusually cultured, not to say, erudite. He would embark on a discussion with great gusto . . . but it would suddenly come to a premature close. He used to pretend to give way suddenly before your arguments. I say pretend because you felt that he had others in reserve. Was it the disdain of a great gentleman for our *bourgeois* dialectics? The supposition warred with his entire absence of side. But I had nevertheless to adhere to it. He so carefully avoided all attempts to force his intimacy. It was impossible to persuade him to take a meal with us.

And yet he could hardly be called a sybarite when he dined at the best hotel in the place. He professed to be on a special diet. Was he ill? Perhaps. As a matter of fact he did not look very robust. . . . I questioned him discreetly. He reddened and got out of it by answering vaguely:

"Digestion! . . ."

What is certain is that he was of a particularly lazy disposition. His least busy day he spent stretched out at full length, his head leaning against his valise, his legs in a rug which he had brought; quite idle, with his eyes open. This attitude drew upon him, besides Playoust's quips, the animosity of the company sergeant-major who, sticking his nose in at the door, would call him slyly:

"Halloa there! De Valpic! As you're doing nothing!"

Guillaumin continued to be my only intimate companion. I did not tell any one but him of my discovery of a hay-loft looking over the Principal's garden. He soon got in the habit of coming there often to join me. It became our headquarters.

I now succeeded in persuading him to go about the town with me. We hardly left each other's side. In the evening he accompanied me to the door of the hotel where I had been able to find a room, and he went back to sleep on the straw. I had thought of asking him to share my bed; but how embarrassing for both of us! He would no doubt have refused.

F— seemed quite commonplace. I had seen it look pretty much the same each time the Division assembled for manoeuvres.

There was the same stream of red trousers rolling through the streets at all hours, besieging the "pubs,"

and rifling the grocers' shops and bazaars, the shopkeepers' one idea being to exploit the reservists whose pockets were usually well-lined. The windows decked with bunting suggested the idea of an eve of the fourteenth of July, or of a visit from the President.

The atmosphere was as calm as possible. Those who had expected riots, or a revolution! I only remember one incident. The report spread one afternoon that a spy had been discovered and arrested at the station.

. . . In five minutes a crowd was shouting in front of the police-station where the transgressor, or transgressors—they talked now of three or four!—had been taken and put under arrest. Policemen were guarding the door. We waited for half an hour amid the growing feverishness. When they came out there was an outcry and a rush. . . . The shameful fury of crowds! . . . I caught sight of the two poor wretches, a man and a woman, little puny, terrified creatures. A motor took them away. They were both cowering under the menace of raised walking-sticks.

The sight had irritated me. It was easy to say spies! I thought of our compatriots, caught unawares in Germany. It might have happened to me. I was there at the time of the Agadir trouble. I teased Guillaumin who had been as bad as the rest. He admitted that he had been in the wrong, but it was too much for him. The Bosches. The filthy Bosches!

The lead had been heaved and soundings taken. All these people hid the sacred passion beneath their calm exterior. They were right. This nation had risen to butcher us. Between them and us a war of extermination was beginning. . . .

And I could so easily have forgotten it!

CHAPTER XIV

THE EXISTING STATE OF MIND

THE Paris papers came regularly; several editions every day, but we were no longer so ravenous for this type of nourishment. When once the period of anxiety concerning Belgium's resistance and the intervention of England was over, we almost lost interest in the rest, yes, even in the first engagements in Lorraine, where our men won such a glorious name for themselves. We felt that nothing of importance would take place for ten days or a fortnight.

Our chief anxiety was to know what they would do with us.

The general opinion was that we would be in the second line (Reservists. The idea!), that we would only look on from afar at the first terrible encounters. . . . When the regulars were put out of action, yes, then it would be our turn to take the field. But it was quite possible that the war would already be well advanced.

What day should we leave? And what would our destination be?

Outlandish rumours were in circulation. They were hailed with a smile, and passed on in fun, but we ended by believing them. What did we know about it? The "tips" always came from such high-placed

officials, generals, or station-masters. One persistent rumour was that we were to be sent to Le Havre, and from there shipped . . . to what port do you think? You'd never guess, however long you went on trying! To Bremen! A landing party! Heavens, we stopped at nothing, with the British fleet behind us! According to another version we were to form part of a reserve force concentrated at Goëtquidam Brittany! The drawback was that we ran the risk of not seeing anything!

Morale! What a strange factor it is in deciding the fate of nations! I failed to take it into account now. This uncertainty weighed on me. I sounded my companions.

"Look here, how do you think things are going . . . all right?"

"What!"

My question astounded them. On looking back it seems to me obvious that an insane optimism held sway. What could the Central Powers do against this gigantic coalition. The Kaiser had lost his head! Driven by the "junker" party, he was risking his all in a fit of despair.

How long would it go on for? The figure quoted was three months.

Three months, I said to myself: three months!

Fate might decide that our army corps, our regiment, was not to be engaged more than once or twice. . . . There would be some rough knocks to put up with! But what of that? Lots would come through! For those who did it would be curiously interesting to look on at the reconstruction of the world which would follow. . . . Would life be any the better for it? Yes. In what way?

I did not know. But I was firmly convinced of it.

In Guillaumin I had a surprising source of high spirits and enthusiasm. He lived in a state of exaltation. He was the only one to read between the lines, in the daily reports, endless sensational pieces of news, extraordinarily favourable to us, withheld, he said, through an excess of modesty.

"They're afraid the public might lose their heads."

If I pretended to be alarmed:

"What's become of the concentration? Look at all the regulars that are about still!"

He retorted with:

"My dear fellow, they're getting two days ahead of the estimates."

He had been to the station. He had seen any amount of trains passing crammed with troops and war material. . . .! An inconceivable number of big guns, and ammunition waggons, and gun carriages! A store of unsuspected riches!

Our staff? Was admirable. Joffre, the great strategist, who left nothing to chance. Pau, the soldier whom the Germans feared more than any one, De Castelnau! Since he had made it his career despite his opinions!

The Government? Perfection. Viviani, the right man in the right place; the strong and many-sided genius that was needed. How fine,—and what a clever move—his letter to Madame Jaurès had been! The results of it were this solidity, and absolute unanimity; the rising *en masse* of the peaceful operatives, the internationalists of yesterday, claiming for their great country the right to live and be respected.

Guillaumin knew the text of the different official declarations and proclamations by heart; he recited scraps of them to me.

"Glorious! What!"

It was not an assumed excitement. I sounded him. He really was delighted to be going. It was the ingenuous wish for the unexpected and for adventure in one who led the most dreary of lives as a civilian. And the need to expend himself in a cause he felt was just. He did not need much urging to bring out such big words as Duty and Patriotism!!

His fervour both lowered him and raised him in my estimation. On one side I was inclined to place him in the class of credulous boobies, like the young fool of a lawyer's clerk I had met in the railway carriage. At the same time he gave me an example of moral warmth and vigour preferable to my frivolity.

He alone seemed changed by these formidable circumstances. He was thrilled. I should like to have been thrilled.

What made the Descroix and Humels so unbearable to me was their peace-time point of view. The way they spent hour after hour playing stupid card games, taking no interest in anything else! It was beyond me, and it worried me. They would not be the ones to save France!

(Should I be! ! !)

Guillaumin reassured me.

"Don't you worry about that! You keep your eye on the *poilus*. That's all that matters!"

I tossed my head. My men? What could I know about them?

I had thirty-three roughs under me, squads 11 and 12. Guillaumin had the same number, squads 9 and

10; Lieutenant Henriot was in command of the platoon.

Up to now, I had tried only to avoid being unpopular. I thought I was succeeding in it. I relied entirely on my corporals, Bouguet and Donnadiou, who were well up in their job.

Chance had thrown together in my section, Judsi and Lamalou, the two scoundrels whom I have already mentioned, among the stolid Beaucerons who were all so much alike that they might have been brothers. They were a scurvy couple. They had already been caught by a patrol one night in town, and brought back drunk, shouting and storming, and had been in such a dangerous mood next day that Henriot had not dared to haul them over the coals for it.

The impressions I had retained of the few weeks once spent on a company, before going to the "Peloton," the one occasion in which I had come into contact for a short period with the lower classes, were these: The barrack was a den of wild beasts, and the peasants real brutes. The fact that the one thing they looked forward to was Sunday when they could drink themselves stupid, made them lower even than the animals. Beyond that the only thing that had worried me was the "promiscuousness." The days of ragging were over; I was free with my cigarettes and "drinks." I could always find someone ready to take my fatigues for me for the sake of a sixpence, and ever since then Bouillon had been my guardian angel. It did not matter how much this pleb was looked down on!

Attached to my original company during the manœuvres, reports had reached the ears of the reserve officer to the effect that I was already well up in my work, and I had at once been made a non-

commissioned officer, a distant and unapproachable being.

My energetic "command" ensured my authority, on the drill-ground at all events. Elsewhere? . . . There was no elsewhere. As for taking a personal interest in each of the men, and searching into, and investigating their characters, as Guillaumin tried to induce me, and forced himself to do,—the idea had never entered my head. To-day it seemed an idle fancy outside the realms of realisation. I felt that this mass of men was too remote from, and, in all probability, hostile to us. No, they did not count at all as individual souls! I listened to Guillaumin as he extolled their sound good sense, and sturdy morale. It was too much to ask of this poor food for cannons.

But one thing struck me, nevertheless; the small, the infinitesimal number of men who "groused." Not a sign of "shirkers." It was astounding to me to note, in the days that followed, how this spirit had spread. I did not see any great enthusiasm, but rather determination, or perhaps it was resignation. There was at all events, no reluctance, no little underhand plots, elaborated with a view to remaining at the depot. I have quoted our friend Belloeil; but even he would willingly have gone with us, I think, but for his asthma, which made him pant like a seal, merely at having to go up into billets.

One drama, I remember, caused a sensation: a reservist who had thrown himself successively through a window, under a cart, and under a train. He was hard to kill, that fellow!

How set he was on doing away with himself! At the inquest, a letter which had been discovered established the fact that the only motive for this act

had been . . . fear. Yes, simply the stupid fear of going to the front. . . . Poor wretch. What a fine funeral ovation they gave him. Good-for-nothing, rotter, and funk were the mildest terms employed. If he had accounted for a Bosche, his skin would have been of some use.

On the fourth day, Friday, the order arrived in the morning to assemble for field-parade.

Guillaumin was triumphant.

"There now, you see! Didn't I tell you so? They're coming all right—even to us!"

The men were taking their valises. And what about us; no, we agreed not to.

We started off. A fig for marching at attention! That was not expected of us. We followed the railway lines. A train was just passing, the carriages decorated with flowers. Soldiers were laughing at the windows.

The 104th Argentan.

"Halloa, you chaps! Wait for us! We're going on foot to have a look at the Bosches!" Judsi shouted.

We halted farther on in a field by the roadside. Suddenly a whistle was blown, and the word was passed round that the captain was there!

In the twinkling of an eye we were formed up again and got into line as well as might be.

Delafosse, the first lieutenant, gave the order:

"Present . . . arms!"

Captain Ribet rode up, mounted on a beautiful grey mare. He was a tall spare man with a crisp moustache and very bright eyes. An ex-officer in the regulars; we knew he had retired when quite young after having won the *légion d'honneur*.

He saluted, and without any preliminaries pointed imperiously at the first section.

"Skirmishing order," he shouted.

We had about fifty yards to cover at a double.

"Kneel!"

We knelt down.

"Advance!"

We stood erect, and then immediately had to operate a change of front. The words of command and evolutions followed each other in rapid and varied succession. The captain gave the order and looked on coldly at the execution of it without uttering a word. We all lacked enthusiasm but it did not go badly, all the same. Our covering sergeants knew what they were about, and Henriot slipped in the necessary explanations. I acquitted myself passably in my thankless rôle of supernumerary. The men charged and deployed, and then returned to their first formation, their movements facilitated by their long experience in former days. During the short intervals of respite, reflections were heard:

"How's that for manœuvres!"

"We are having a dose."

At last arms were piled and while the men amused themselves by pulling out pipes or chunks of bread, the captain blew his whistle again.

"The non-commissioned officers!"

The first thing he did was to find fault with us.

"Why haven't you got your valises?"

The subaltern opened his mouth. . . .

"That will do. We'll consider it as said!"

He had a few words of praise for the way we drilled.

"There was a little hesitation in the third though."

"Among us! really!"

He added a few commonplace remarks on our duties which played such an important part in the field. We must prove the value of the material entrusted to us. It was for us to make the most of it.

Seizing the opportunity afforded by a brief silence, Playoust thought he might ask him what the probable date of our departure would be. . . . Sunday was talked of.

"I am not here to answer questions, Sergeant!"

He warned us that he would inspect us next morning at nine o'clock.

"Service marching orders. Ready to leave. And mind you see that nothing is missing!"

He dismissed us with a salute.

Directly we had got away Guillaumin exclaimed:

"A queer fish that!"

"You like him?"

"Yes, I do. It's men like that that we want!"

I protested. My impression of him, on the contrary was an unpleasant one. Who did the man think he was, to treat us as little boys?

When we got back into quarters, I made fun of the sudden zeal consuming my comrades. The prospect of this inspection next day scared them. Each one rushed off to put his men on their mettle. Guillaumin especially was quite off his chump. I, for my part, contented myself with warning my corporals that everything must be in order at the time fixed! I should hold them responsible!

That done, I did not worry any more! I spent the afternoon resting in my hay-loft.

The best of it was that I was sergeant of the day. I ought to have gone and put myself at the disposi-

tion of the adjutant. Bah! He could do without me, without the world coming to an end.

My predecessor, Belloeil, had told me that I should have to take the men who had been given orders the day before to the barracks on the stroke of five o'clock. They would draw their pay there, and I should countersign the register. . . . The list was handed over to me. They watched for me at the exit, but I arranged to escape them; De Valpic would take them to-morrow.

One of them accosted me in the town; I snubbed him, and he went off cursing and swearing. Guillaumin blamed me for it.

"Poor fellow! Suppose he had some purchase to make!"

"Oh rot! I'm doing him a good turn; he'll drink a drop less than usual, that's all!"

CHAPTER XV

AT THE GLOBE CAFÉ

WE got there early. Nearly all the old "Peloton" lot were to meet there that evening. The large room at the back had been put at our disposal.

Punch was served to everyone. Toasts were drunk half as a rag. There was a tap-room atmosphere. Everyone was in uproarious spirits—feverish with the excitement of the departure which was so close at hand. A school-master named Groningaire started off with a song—he had a good voice—then some patriotic verses, while we sang the refrain in chorus.

Miquel went to the piano.

"Go it! Play us something!"

He was known to be a performer.

"What style do you want?"

"Oh, anything! Improvise something!"

"The 'Battle,' g-r-r-r-r and symphony!"

There was a general laugh. He sat down on the music stool.

"First part. Four o'clock in the morning."

His fingers raced over the keys. A running accompaniment in the bass suggested the army sleeping. A high note, the bugle call, suddenly burst forth followed instantaneously by shouts, the stir of troops

awakening and moving to and fro, and the neighing of horses. . . .

“Bravo!”

Reminiscences no doubt of melodies he had composed or learnt. His rare skill soldered them into a sort of pot-pourri, which was at the same time both genial and burlesque. He jerked out the titles of motifs: the start at dawn, the approach of the enemy, the deployment, then the surprise of the first shots, the scattering, and the reply. . . . The pianist's fancy multiplied and expanded, painting an extraordinary picture. In the left hand, the cannon rumbled ceaselessly in hollow tones. In the treble a frenzy of staccato notes crackled like a fusillade. Between the two, smothered vociferations, and the trampling of the combatants could be distinguished. To end up with there was the charge, swelling harmonies, and a roar of glory and madness, throughout which fragments of the famous “*La Goutte à boire ! ! !*” recurred persistently.

Miquel paused. There was a burst of applause.

“Hush!” he said. “Wait for the day after. . . .”

He struck a minor chord, succeeded by two or three others, equally lugubrious, a gloomy *arpeggio* strengthened the impression of mourning. . . . The day after! yes. There was a slight shudder. I recognised Beethoven's *Funeral March*.

“How idiotic! What are you playing that for?”

Denais had got up, and was drawing his hand across his forehead. Then embarrassed by our glances he forced a wry smile.

“Rotting apart, it's not exactly cheerful!”

A few backed him up. Others shrugged their shoulders. A discussion began which degenerated

into an uproar. Laraque took possession of the piano and romped through a "tango" which was applauded. Miguel was called upon again; but he refused point blank this time, and it was not very long before he left, perhaps because he was offended.

Then Guillaumin and I went to swell a group which had formed in a corner, round Fortin, who was holding forth.

A robust fellow, with an enormous forehead, and a clever, ugly face, he was repeating the lessons he had just brought back from Germany where he had been living for some time. His rich voice carried wonderfully, supported by his energetic gestures. A frequenter of public meetings and debating societies, one was tempted to forgive him if he was rather inclined to like the sound of his own voice, because he spoke well.

To begin with, however, I only half listened to him. He was enlarging upon the industrial qualities of that race, their method, and patience, and tenacity of purpose, their thoroughness in perfecting detail; on their moral virtues too, from which the others sprang.

This sort of thing had been overdone! However at such a time it assumed a striking note of unexpectedness and daring. This Frenchman obviously overflowed with sympathy, or at all events admiration for the foe he was about to face. . . . And not one of us protested. . . . What impartiality, I thought. Was it to our credit, or discredit?

I now followed the speaker's arguments with interest. He occasionally spoke so decidedly and precisely that I suspected him of dishing up for our benefit certain passages already composed for the work he was meditating.

On the other hand one had the feeling that one was not the dupe of a rhetorician. I was able when necessary to verify the exactitude of his statements by my own recollections.

Here he was sketching the portrait of the young German, steady and strong, accustomed from his earliest childhood to long walks with his pack on his back, his first attempts at warlike frolics, keen on swimming, shooting, and gymnastics, more sporting in reality than we were who had been won over to the rough games from over the channel. They were chaste too and had no false shame about admitting it; not exhausted, depraved, and indeed contaminated, as a result of the stupid dissipation which we appear to think necessary for our young men. I could see the companions of my excursions round Iéna again,—Otto Kraëmer, merry, affectionate, and untiring—and so virtuous—questioning me with an innocent smile, quite free of any suspicion of envy, on the pleasures of Paris.

Fortin showed us how war had become inevitable for these people. Since they were suffocating at home! They were a prolific race; that was their foremost merit. The necessity and also the capacity for expansion in a country which in forty years doubles it's population! There was the fruitful young sap. To them belonged the future.

We were listening, silent and engrossed, leaning on our elbows. . . . Ladmiraut demanded some detail from time to time. He had pulled out his notebook. Guillaumin, who was beside me, seemed to be the only one who could not listen to this language without impatience; he strummed nervously on the marble table-top.

Fortin went on to say that over there it was the entire populace from the Kaiser down to the last of the beggars, who dreamt of the greater Germany. . . . The fateful hour had struck. . . . He reminded us of the saying where the five sons of the German family came to demand a share of his heritage from the only son of the French family. We certainly had no luck in just happening to be the neighbours and thus the picked adversaries of this terribly covetous race, and in holding so many rich provinces that they meant to annex again in the name of ancient traditions for the Germanic Empire! Any schoolboy coming from Germany would tell you of their ambitions. To begin with they must have what remained to us of Lorraine and Champagne and Flanders, they'd see about Burgundy and the Franche-Comté, when the occasion arose!

"Then you think we shall be beaten?" Guillaumin broke in harshly.

It was like a cold douche, we looked at each other. Fortin shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I'll tell you one thing, I think, and that is that we're fighting in a cause . . . that is out of date. We no longer incarnate a great force worthy of existence. Our day is nearly done. Just think how long we have held the stage. Mark you, I do not say that our end will not be glorious. We are an old fighting race, we shall do wonders, I think, before succumbing. Nor do I say that our decline is not to be regretted in the superior interests of civilisation. . . ."

"Then you see no hope of anything but decline and disappearance!"

Guillaumin's face was kindled, his big nose shone, his hand was clutching at a match stand.

"Sss . . . ! I say. Chuck it at his head!" whispered Holveck.

Someone laughed, and there was a short relaxation.

I did not take my eyes off Fortin, wondering whether he would accept the challenge.

And he actually did! He made up his mind to it. It was a thankless task, he said, to go against all our prejudices and cherished illusions. But still, if he was driven to it. . . . And perhaps it would be better that we should realise what we were in for! . . .

"Yes, start away then!" Guillaumin exclaimed. "Tell us what you think and what you know!"

What he knew? The other protested that he was not admitted to the secrets of the gods, that he was lacking in the necessary technical knowledge concerning military matters, but that what he feared from certain reliable data, was the "*kolossal*" force—the word is laughable, not the thing it stands for—of this horde of invaders about to fall upon us. People in France reassured themselves by the aid of simplex calculations. They summarily compared the figures of the population, with the triumphant argument that the enemy must put so and so many men on the Russian front. . . . As if there was not an immense gulf fixed between the actual and the theoretical returns! As if it was not the vitality of the races that would have the last word! Or again, the total of Germany's effective forces was put at twenty-five corps against our twenty-one corps! Only another way of throwing dust in our eyes. Who suspected that on the two banks of the Rhine there were fifty or sixty corps, already complete with their full complement, ready to be set in motion at a sign and destined to be formed into twelve or fifteen formidable

armies. With them there was no waste of material; each individual had his own appointed place, the technicians in the factories; the smallest details were foreseen and provided for, the most recent discoveries in every sphere, exploited. The troops were young and sound, and their discipline was marvellous. Each soldier had his map and compass. Their uniform was far and away the least noticeable. Their equipment was faultless. Their heavy artillery unique (it would be our most unpleasant surprise!). They had adopted quite new principles for use in aerial warfare. . . . What more was there? The best-regulated commissariat, propaganda among the neutrals, accomplices among their adversaries. . . . And then the spy system. Ah, yes! the spy system!

"Oh, magnificent!" muttered Guillaumin.

"I beg your pardon. As they wanted war, it was only right that they should be as well prepared for it as possible. One can't help admiring them for that!"

Guillaumin, still unconvinced, sneered:

"Oh, charming! There's nothing to be done then! And to-morrow a German Europe!"

Fortin having made a movement as if to say, "Why not?" a certain member of us protested all the same: "Oh no! Anything but that. We would fight for it! The triumph of brute force. Government by the sword (all the old catch words), we couldn't stand that. . . . Laraque declared that when we were beaten he should go to live in America. Ladmiraute asserted pedantically that all attempts at universal sway were foredoomed to failure. Napoleon was an example of it!

Fortin retorted:

"We exaggerate when we talk of tyranny. . . .

There would be a certain amount of rearranging to be got through. What these people want, is. . . .”

“To pick our pockets,” cried Guillaumin.

“Yes, to pick our pockets, and also. . . .”

Fortin let himself be carried away. Was it paradox or conviction?

“Would you like to know what they want? Well, simply the reign of reason, of their reason. To their physical need for conquest is added this intellectual need. I think that in the case of a crushing victory they would not be exacting, that they would content themselves with re-organising and ordering the world to their ideas. The triumph of ‘*Kultur*,’ yes! Without doubt they would allow as many individual liberties and indeed local constitutions, as possible, to subsist. Their charter of empire is so convenient! The United States of Europe. That is their avowed dream, often expressed by the Kaiser. Peace, yes, but under the aegis of the Hohenzollern, chosen of God! An imposing task to which they bring the fervour of apostles, which to-morrow, on the battle-field will become the fanaticism of martyrs. The horror of this contest does not dismay them, they consider it unavoidable. There are two obstacles in their path; France in their eyes grown old and debased; Russia that huge inorganic body, still in a state of barbarism. Their idea was to humiliate both nations, with the object of raising them up again later on while imbuing them with the moral and intellectual virtues on which the Teuton prides himself. England impedes them equally. This conflict too was fated. They despise the English because they consider them too exclusively concerned with their well-being, with their comfort; too material, shopkeepers, in fact! They themselves

pose as idealists and philosophers, but heirs to the spiritualistic traditions, and regardful of the property, of the integri——”

“What about the violation of Belgium!” Guillaumin interrupted.

“Oh, that! That does’nt count: *Das ist Krieg!* It’s only outside the state of war that they flatter themselves that they’re good, just, sentimental, and gentle. It is impossible to deny that their ambition, in the main, is generous; to put an end to the inferior period of improvisation and disorder, and to instigate the reign of perfect equilibrium—of happiness, that is!—among men.”

He paused:

“And bear in mind that it must be admitted that no race has ever had a better chance of success than they have at this moment!”

Yes, Fortin showed us this prodigious result as being remote and still hidden behind the veil of the future, but within reach—all Germany was aware of it!—of the present generation or at all events of the next. German Europe? But, except for the three powers in question, who were to be overcome by force, was it not that already?

He showed up, in a crude light, the important underground activities of the exchequer and the cabinet; quite another side of the question. Italy, our famous Latin sister, peremptorily wrested from the sphere of French influence. Austria! With what supreme skill the rival of yesterday had been converted into the intimate ally of to-day. Turkey: simply a German colony, who, on the day prescribed, would hurl all her weight into the balance. The Scandinavian countries, Spain, Switzerland, Holland,—all pronounced German-

ophils. It was a real miracle that Belgium should have barred their way! The Church instinctively approving two traditional Empires, full of spite and distrust for a republic. And then the Balkans! Nothing but sad surprises could be awaited, from Roumania, whose king, Carol, had bound himself by treaty to the fortunes of the Central Powers; from Bulgaria, whose just grievances were being exploited by the enemy; from Greece who was retained in this orbit by her king, the Kaiser's brother-in-law! A fine piece of work by the Wilhelmstrasse! Fortin exhibited the play of this far-sighted and prudent diplomacy, which had been weaving its web for so long, and peopling the European thrones with German princes and queens for the last fifty years.

There was no gainsaying it. This fellow, Fortin, was deucedly interesting! We were all listening, down to the most rowdy group, who had little by little stopped talking and come up. There were but few protestations now. Foreheads, furrowed by wrinkles, were unconsciously bowed in assent.

But there was a sudden climax. A dry voice made itself heard behind us. We turned round. A lieutenant was standing on the threshold of the room.

"Your name! I want the speaker's name!"

We were all stupefied. Fortin got up.

"And 'stand at attention' first of all."

The other explained the position. He was pale.

"Your company?"

"The seventeenth."

"You're a despicable worm! You dare to speak in such a way! You, a French non-commissioned officer! What would a German say or do? Get back to your quarters at once. You'll hear from me later."

The officer's voice was trembling. Fortin did not reply. Liberty was dead! He took down his belt which was hanging on a hook, shook the few hands held out to him, then saluted and left the room.

What a douche! A dismayed silence reigned for a few minutes. At last we left the place, but even outside we hardly spoke.

"Lieutenant Coudray, wasn't it?"

"There's no knowing where this may end. . . ."

"Court-martial!"

Ladmiraut unburdened himself.

"Just what I said; Fortin exaggerates."

"Exactly!"

Everyone agreed that it was bound to happen.

It seemed to me that our voices were lowered. Did we mistrust each other? Really, the unexpected appearance of this officer! . . . Someone must have gone to warn him. . . . These were nice times, certainly!

We separated, and Guillaumin took me home as usual.

"I don't wish him any ill," he said, "but you must confess that he was asking for it!"

"Who? Fortin?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Oh, look here! He said enough to make one jump through the ceiling. No, but can you see the Bosches calmly laying hands on Champagne and Flanders!"

I was still suffering from the effects of the irritation and humiliation aroused in me by the intervention of the Lieutenant. I could hear his cutting voice. Some rotter or other! But there was nothing to be done, but to bow before his superior rank.

It must be added that I had come under the depressing influence. . . . What a hit it was at my illusions, at our groundless self-confidence! To go and get killed for a cause we knew was already lost. Oh, it really was the limit!

A cold rage filled me. I vented it on poor Guillaumin to begin with. He was on the point of returning to the subject of his Champagne and his Flanders. . . . One would have thought they belonged to him and that someone wanted to pick his pocket of them!

None of that! I shut him up, and told him what an ass I thought him. The dull resentment which had been heaped up in me by these first days of subjection, rose up from the depths of my being. And I did not stop at that; my egoism and the anarchism of my bad days rebelled.

I suddenly announced that I hoped the socialistic agitations would come to something.

"What agitations?" Guillaumin asked.

"Oh!" I said. "They were keeping quiet on the subject, by order! but they existed, could not help existing in spite of certain recantations. Would they smother the peoples' poignant cry for peace at any price, much longer? War on the War! Following up the bold refrain, I asserted that I should like to see the workmen who had been called up, fire their first shots at the instigators of the catastrophe, all these statesmen, generals, and financiers of both countries, who were driving two peaceful nations to the slaughter! As if all the political and economic interests in the world were worth this massacre of innocents!

I went further—or lower. I blush when I remember to what degrading lengths I allowed myself to go.

If our neighbours were really so passionately anxious for the expansion of their "*Kultur*" as Fortin had said they were, did he, Guillaumin, know what remained to be done. Simply fold our arms and wait for them. They would not devour us, or at least not all of us! We should be invaded? And then? Annexed? What a misfortune that would be to be sure! There would be no more France? Well, if she had to disappear, why not to-morrow, just as well as in a hundred years! All these tales of separate races, and of native lands were simply the patter of disastrous phrase-makers. . . . Let all those who believed them go and get killed for them. There could be nothing more just! To the frontier with the enthusiasts, the convinced—the imbeciles—who could not bear the idea of changing their names. But as for us, for me, who did not care a blow about it all. . . . !

"Talk away!" said Guillaumin.

"What?"

"You won't take me in!"

"How do you mean?"

"You want to get a rise out of me!"

"I?"

"You'll fight as well as the best of them!"

"Well, what will that prove?"

He did not answer me. There was no need. I was at a loss for words. I was pinked.

Recall to reality. The time was past for weighing the reasons for and against. The philosophic juggling. The superior sphere of action, offered itself, nay imposed itself upon us. . . . Fortin, Guillaumin, I myself; we were all in uniform, we were going to fight. . . . Then there was only one thing to be done, to strain our muscles and our soul, to stake

our fate on hope and on faith in our cause. What folly to be both judge and suitor. What grandeur in belief, even when absurd!

If only I had been sure that I should fight as well as he said I should!

CHAPTER XVI

CAVILLINGS

As it was my day on duty it fell to me to march the men who had reported sick to the M. O. that morning.

I should have liked to have time to cast an eye over my men's equipment before the captain came to take kit inspection. My mind was not entirely at ease on the subject, when, in passing, I had asked Corporal Bouguet if he thought it would go all right, he had curtly replied that he couldn't see everything, he hadn't got eyes all over his head.

Sick parade naturally promised to take longer than usual. Captain Ribet had made searching enquiries the day before and consulted the sick lists. He had told of about twenty weaklings to report themselves to the chief Medical Officer. I had not been surprised to catch sight of De Valpic's name on the list which I had been told to hand over.

Surgeon-major Bouchut, a stout, apoplectic-looking man, arrived in a state of perspiration, and swearing hard began to sound the men's hearts and lungs. He was not very ferocious to-day. He must have had instructions to strike out the good-for-nothings. Whenever it was a case of enteritis, rheumatism, or bronchitis he jerked out at me:

"Oh, he'd better stay at the depot!"

Then, turning to the man, he would growl:

"You'll have to stay behind my lad!"

A well-set-up fellow out of my section came and announced:

"I'm an old trooper, I am!"

"Well, what about it?"

"And so I shan't march."

"Oh, you think so, do you?"

"I never have marched."

"A good opportunity to learn!"

"It's on account of a slight rupture. . . ."

"Let's have a look!"

"Bouchut felt his groin."

"You wear a truss, do you?"

"Yes, sir-r!"

"In that case you can walk round the world!"

"But"

"Off with you! Brr! Next man now!"

The next one on the list was De Valpic. I considered his thin body with all the ribs showing.

"What's the matter with you?" Bouchut asked.

"Nothing much, sir, but the captain told me to. . . ."

Bouchut bent down over him:

"Take a deep breath. . . ."

Just then a hubbub arose, an orderly was slating a man who had just upset the bottle containing the tincture of iodine.

"Can't you keep quiet, confound you!"

But Bouchut's attention was again distracted by the arrival of a surgeon-lieutenant. They gossiped for a moment and then returning at last to De Valpic, he said:

"Then you don't cough at all?"

"Hardly at all, sir."

"Do you want to go to the front?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Very well, then. Must not be overdone," he dictated to me.

The examination came to an end. When I went out I came across the man with the rupture again. He was cursing and swearing! "Well, if that wasn't a shame! To make an old dragoon, with an illness like that, walk! They were a set of bullies, that's what they were! . . ." But he'd be even with them yet! He knew a thing or two. The first time they were under fire, he would stagger, and let himself fall. But first, he was going to write to Sembat, who was a pal of his.

"Switch off Loriot!" somebody warned him. "Here come the N. C. O.'s!"

I wondered whether I should pack him off to the defaulters' room. . . . Perhaps it would raise my prestige, but I let the opportunity slip by, and finally decided to have heard nothing.

Guillaumin came up to me. He was bringing the letters from the barracks and good-naturedly drew my attention to the fact that I was the one who ought to have gone to fetch them. He agreed in addition to be responsible for their distribution. He was rummaging in his pockets.

"There's a post card for you."

A post card really! I was not expecting anything. A few lines from my father and a note from Laquarrière, in answer to one I had written him, was all I had received since the beginning.

I looked at the post mark; illegible. I did not

recognise the handwriting, it was feminine. I turned to the signature: "Jeannine!"

The little Landry girl!

What does she think of it all? I wondered, amused. She, who would not hear of war! I remembered our trifling on that railway platform. . . . What a short time ago it was . . . and yet it seemed so long. She had written very closely. I noted her graceful attempt to write me something beyond the usual commonplace remarks. She gave a short description of their railway journey. On hearing the great news, they had gone to Geneva (a reassuring atmosphere), and on to Paris the day after. Since then they had settled down again as well as might be, and without a maid, at St. Mandé. But what about me? I was far more interesting! In barracks, no doubt? Or perhaps already on my way to the front? They were counting on my being able to let . . . friends, know how I was getting on. The card ended with these words, "We think of you a great deal."

I re-read it; I was touched. I would certainly answer this delightful girl very soon! I should have liked to do so at once; but a stupid feeling of bashfulness forbade my seeming in too much of a hurry.

We assembled for the inspection. The men came on to parade, one by one, staggering under their packs, which were continually slipping and having to be hoisted up again, with a jerk of their shoulders. All at once they realised that the inspection was not a mere matter of form. Beginning with the first platoon the captain stopped in front of each man.

Guillaumin whispered to me:

"His eyes are skinned right enough."

Corporal Bouguet continued to look at me sourly. Donnadiou, sandy-haired and stolid, when I questioned him, shook his head, and did not seem to want to be answerable for anything either.

We had half-an-hour's wait, which was distinctly unnerving. Our turn came at last.

Bouguet was examined first and passed as impeccable. Thank Heaven! And his neighbour, Siméon, too. I was beginning to breathe more freely. The captain escorted by the company quartermaster-sergeant stopped in front of Paquette, a villager with a blank expression.

"Take off your valise. That's right! Now open it. Let's see your housewife . . . and the inside. . . ."

The man cautiously emptied the contents, consisting of three old buttons and some rusty pins, into his hand.

"No needles? Or thread?"

"We haven't been given any, sir."

"What's this? They were given out yesterday. What's the meaning of this, sergeant?"

"That's right, sir!" I said.

The captain raised his voice.

"Hands up! in the 11th and 12th those who've got no needles or thread."

Three or four arms, then seven, eight, ten, were raised.

"Extremely important! Tears are not rare occurrences in the field, nor are burst buttons. And if you've nothing to mend them with! A pair of trousers which won't keep up, means a man out of action!"

He went on to the next man, Judsi!

"Got your body belt?"

Judsi shook his head grotesquely.

"Don't wear one, sir!"

"Did you draw one?"

"Yes, sir!"

"What's become of it?"

Judsi made a movement expressive of ignorance.

"Someone probably nabbed it, sir! Seein' as I don't wear one."

The captain turned to me.

"So, you don't see to all this?"

I protested that I had told him. . . .

"Told him! Told him! . . . You see the result! When you have ten or fifteen men down with dysentery. . . .!"

He went on to the next. It was done on purpose. Here, a shoulder strap had come unsewn, there one or two buttons missing, this képi had no chin-strap, that bayonet was rusty, a certain rifle was not properly cleaned. Where was the lantern belonging to No. 11 half-section? And the camp gear! It was quite clear that it had been badly distributed. The captain dropped straight on to the weak spot and emphasised it coldly.

When the non-commissioned officers were collected afterwards, he gave vent to his feelings.

"It's lucky we're not going off this evening! That would be a nice state of affairs! No. 3 platoon is a positive disgrace! I am speaking of section No. 2! Sergeant Dreher, at one o'clock I shall inspect your half-sections and I can assure you that if anything goes wrong this time!" He twirled his long moustache. I was frightfully annoyed. What irritated me above everything was the ironical satisfaction shown by several of my fellow N. C. O.'s; I tried to excuse myself.

"It was my day on duty, sir!"

But Ravelli interrupted:

"Oh, it was you, was it? I wondered who it could be. . . . You never turned up."

I was filled with a wild desire to fall upon my corporals, but Bouguet was waiting for me, bristling with rage. Ready to bite his head off I turned upon Donnadieu, who put on a vexed, sheepish expression.

I swore at the men roundly, in the approved N.C.O. style. Did they think they could snap their fingers at me? Getting me cursed like that! So they weren't even capable of appearing in service marching order? So jolly difficult, wasn't it?

"Such humbug from a blooming plug!" Judsi muttered.

I told them about the supplementary inspection, and moderated my tone in view of their obvious bad temper.

"Come along, let's look alive. Everyone must do his bit!"

Cook-house door had gone. Lamalou exclaimed:

"Arf a mo'. Carn't work on an empty belly."

A long hour elapsed before any one deigned to start work again and even then they did not put their backs into it. I was horrified at the number of dirty mess-tins and water-bottles, of uncleaned boots, and above all, of the fittings missing; sets of "pull throughs" had to be complete in groups of four! Stores orders must be got and signed by the company sergeant-major, and the things drawn . . . and the time was being frittered away in dawdling and gossiping. I think the knaves did it on purpose. My remarks all fell on deaf ears, whatever tone I adopted—I tried

them all! I felt a sort of jeering hostility rising against me which infuriated me, though I did not let them see it.

Bouillon luckily lent a hand. Having once had the rank of corporal, he still retained a certain hold over his comrades.

He laid himself out and was here, there, and everywhere, lavishing rebukes and fisticuffs.

When Captain Ribet reappeared at the time arranged everything went well. The inspection was even more minute than it had been in the morning, but this time he found only a few infinitesimal details to criticise.

When he left he said to me:

“Aren't you more satisfied?”

I did not answer, but met his remark with the regulation coldness.

CHAPTER XVII

SUSPICIONS OF EMOTION

THE presentation of the Colours was announced for three o'clock. We would willingly have dispensed with climbing up to the parade-ground! Goodness knows I was not looking forward to the ceremony.

Our company was the last to arrive. A major wearing an eye-glass, urged his horse past us. He was an insolent, bloated-looking creature, with a sallow complexion, and greeted our company officer with a bitter-sweet remark which the latter, to my delight, acknowledged in the same tone.

The colonel appeared. He was quite white, although still young, a cavalier of imperious bearing. With his manly face and his moustache he reminded one strongly of "Dumény" in *La Flambee*.

He rode slowly up and down among our ranks. Chests were thrown out at his approach. He made a few remarks in a firm but kindly tone. Then the order was given to the two battalions to close up into a semi-circle.

Controlling his mount, the colonel looked round on us proudly, and began to harangue us.

I listened. I had come in a sarcastic frame of mind. What could he say that would not be stale or commonplace?

Indeed I had foreseen this issue of ready-made phrases on the decisive importance of the struggle upon which we were embarking; it was a question of safeguarding our country and our lives against a nation which was becoming a menace to the human race. . . . But the inflections of a manly voice conferred a certain grandeur on the hackneyed theme.

"A fine actor," I repeated to myself. "More and more like Dumény!"

I tried, like this, to avoid being carried away, then I began to give in. I admitted that a certain beauty resulted from the perfect harmony between his words and their object. I read in the men's face the revelation of a virtue, until now unknown even to them. For the first time I had the intuition that these peasants and working-men and *bourgeois*, for the most part doltish, narrow-minded beings, would, if certain chords in them were touched, be capable of great things. . . .

And what about me? Oh! I should be an on-looker as usual! That would be quite enough for me.

The colonel concluded:

"Now, my friends, you are about to march past your Colours. They are new, they have not been under fire, they do not bear the names of glorious victories in their folds like their seniors of the 1st. . . . Well, it is for us to dower them."

A thrill ran through the ranks, then the whole mass stood like stone. The bugles sounded the vehement, tragic call which always shakes me physically.

We marched rapidly in column of fours up towards the bugles which called and guided us with their heroic flourish. I suddenly wished I could shed my egoism and vibrate in unison with the two thousand men, who, in this hour, were being consecrated my brothers in

arms. I flogged my imagination. The Colours. The word echoed within me, awakening a procession of sacred memories and emotions. I could see myself as a child at the window with my mother leaning over me, clapping my hands to salute the standard of the "8th Cuirassiers" in front of which rode my father, very upright on his big black horse. At that time I used to revel in the many tales of heroes who let themselves be killed rather than abandon the staff, or expended a prodigious amount of cunning in order to save the remnants of it.

Were not these Colours the emblem of the country we had risen to defend, the symbol of everything that could raise our soldiers' hearts? My bosom swelled at these thoughts. We were drawing nearer to it; I fixed ardent eyes on it. . . .

It was certainly beautiful, half unfurled in the breeze, with its rich fresh tints and fringe of gold. A sub-lieutenant, looking very pale and proud, was holding it firmly against his hip.

The din of the bugles increased, filling our hearts. . . . We passed by. . . .

And yet no! No! My . . . irreverence rebelled. To become excited over this tinsel, these few yards of painted stuff! Had I hoped for this thing? I had not yet got so far!

Our last evening—strict confinement to barracks.

I had retired to my hay-loft. I leant my elbows on the window-sill overlooking the garden.

I was surprised to hear the murmur of voices below me. I leant out and saw a couple there.

When I recognised little Frémont and his wife, sitting side by side on a stone bench, my first feeling

was one of vague impatience. The separation of husband and wife! A touching subject for the pen!

How had they managed to slip in there? A chance word which reached my ears explained it. The principal's wife had had pity on them and had given them the key. The little wife had contrived that; she had not been able to bear the idea of being deprived of her Marcel on the last evening.

I considered her sardonically. "Let's have a look at this woman in love!"

I have already said what my opinion of her was. I never thought I should change it. This evening, however, though her features were already merging with the growing twilight, it seemed to me that her face shone with a rarer radiance. Was it her love that transfigured this child?

She had taken off her hat and was leaning her brown head on her husband's shoulder, while he held her close, his arm round her waist. Their foreheads and eyes and lips caressed each other. They were talking below their breath. No other sound but the rustle of the wind disturbed the deep silence.

I was indiscreet enough to play the eavesdropper.

She was the one who spoke the most, in little, plaintive, tender phrases, like the twittering of birds. I could only follow the general trend of her remarks, but it was enough for me to see that she was not bemoaning herself lest she should rob him of his courage. She only dwelt in retrospect on the happy weeks they had spent together. Many injunctions followed. They would be sure to write to each other every day, and think of each other all the while.

I found it easier to catch his grave, reassuring replies. The tone of his voice baffled me. Here was

Fremont, the retiring little man, with shy manners, who liked to keep in the background and always asked advice, appearing in the rôle of comforter! His protecting fondness enfolded his beloved.

I continued to lean out above them, my elbows on the stone window-sill, my hands joined. My malevolence gradually subsided.

That this was merely the repetition of a scene which had been enacted all through the ages, no longer seemed to me a sufficient reason to smile at it. On the contrary, I was stirred by the thought of the eternal chain of loves and partings.

Night had fallen. The trees in the orchard seemed so many phantoms. Not a light to be seen. Some birds flew silently across the night air. I could hardly distinguish the two lovers now, but it seemed to me that their lips had sought and found each other. There was silence for a short space. Then a sentence was breathed softly. A voice trembled into tears. I gathered from certain allusions that she was afraid, though she did not say so, that he might never see their little child.

Sitting there motionless, I dedicated my pitying sympathy to them and thought how few men there were among all the thousands I had seen marching past this afternoon, who were not leaving some woman at home, wife or lover, and some child of their flesh. . . . Poor souls! How terrible their grief must be! I ought to have congratulated myself on the fact that I was leaving nothing behind me. Why did I now so poignantly regret my solitude; did I envy the farewells uttered amid tears and the sealing of vows?

There was a noise behind me: Guillaumin. I left the window, an instinctive delicacy of feeling pre-

vented me from drawing his attention to the presence of the couple in the garden.

We went down into the yard again. My companion was in tremendous form. He held forth on a hundred and one subjects, and I agreed with him absent-mindedly. My thoughts were wandering capriciously. I thought of my brother Victor for whose safe return someone was praying. . . . A strange insistent idea kept recurring to my mind, of writing to the girl who had thought of me yesterday.

CHAPTER XVIII

A RETURN OF EGOISM

THE last distribution of stores had just taken place—biscuits, haversack rations, and iron rations. Cartridges too, fifteen packets a head; a pretty tough load, in addition to everything else. A lot of men were grouching about where they should put them.

The worst of it was that there was some surplus. The company commander who was passing said:

“You’re not going to leave those behind, mind!”

I took two extra packets, and Guillaumin four. He remarked:

“This is the most necessary part of your equipment, you chaps, don’t you make any mistake about that!”

He had few imitators. Playoust, who was prowling round, jeered.

“For the Bosches? But my dear fellow you won’t see any for six weeks!”

It was not at all encouraging. Lamalou happened to turn up, and as an old stager, at once exclaimed:

“Shove one along, and let’s ’ave a look!”

He had formerly been in one of the flying columns in Morocco where the replenishment of ammunition was a difficulty. Guillaumin threw him a packet.

“Catch!”

The other caught it in mid air, then another, and

another, five, ten, fifteen. That doubled his load and he went on shouting.

"Another! And another! Just to make 'em dance!"

His example was decisive. Five minutes later there was nothing left of the heap.

"The creature knows how to make himself useful!" I thought. It was a pity he drank so much! He had just got into new and serious trouble. A scandal in a pub, as usual—the officer on rounds had reported him—he had been imprisoned—and the company sergeant-major was innocently congratulating himself upon having got rid of him!

But the captain got him out, and made a point of having a heart-to-heart talk with him. What could he have threatened him with? With leaving him at the depot I think. The other had to promise to be good, he reappeared triumphant.

"A regular brick, the Captain."

Ravelli could not get over it.

At two o'clock I began to get ready; we were to start at four. I was fully equipped; nothing was missing. My pockets were stuffed with the endless little necessaries for which there was no room elsewhere: tooth-brush, medicine-case, string, pocket-knife, lighter electric torch. Bouillon had conscientiously tidied me up and cleaned my equipment. In consideration of what I owed him, I had tipped him ten francs. He hesitated. It was a large sum! I insisted upon his taking it. I did not like being indebted to people.

I was alone in our room. I had just slipped my swollen pack over my shoulder. My water-bottle

was lying on a shelf above me. I reached out my hand to take it. Ugh! it slipped out of my hand, and fell on to the tiles.

Damn—oh, damn. Supposing it leaked!

I ran to a tap and began to fill it.

Yes, there was no doubt about it. It was done for!

I was in despair. Nothing worse could have happened to me. I knew the incomparable value of a few drops of moisture at critical moments. When you are exhausted and choked by the sun and the dust, there is nothing like a drop of water on a piece of sugar, or a thimbleful of rum to revive you. And on a route march too you are sustained by the mere thought that you are carrying with you this source of refreshment. And I who had taken such care, and was so pleased at having this clean well-corked water-bottle. . . . What odiously bad luck! My whole campaign seemed to me to be poisoned by it. . . .

Bouillon arrived on the scene. Directly I had told him, distractedly, of my misfortune.

"Good heavens!" he said, "that it should 'appen just now! It's far too late to get it soldered!"

I sighed. He looked round the room.

"W'y not sneak one?"

As I shrugged my shoulders. He continued:

"I'll undertake the job if yer like?"

"But how?"

"Oh, I'll get one from someone or other."

"You mustn't touch Guillaumin's things, mind."

"No, 'e's in the section. Wot abaht this one?"

"De Valpic's?"

"All right! Wait a minute!"

"But I say, he. . . ?"

I hesitated.

"He would notice it! The cases are marked, look. . . ."

"Don't you go an' worry yerself abaht that now! You've only got to change them! You go an' keep an eye on the door. . . ."

I went and watched the corridor. I was consumed by a lively remorse. But what did it matter! Each one must fend for himself! He would have to get out of the difficulty as best he could. After all there was nothing more usual in the regiment than these sly thefts. Why, someone had relieved me of one of my brushes only the day before yesterday! I blamed myself for my horrible selfishness, but I had practised it for so long. The opportunity was too tempting! Anything rather than to suffer, hour after hour, from thirst or the fear of thirst! And did I not promise myself—hypocrite that I was—to share my ration of water with the comrade I had despoiled?

In the twinkling of an eye Bouillon had dexterously drawn the two bottles out of their cloth cases, and effected the exchange.

"Nobody will ever be any the wiser!"

De Valpic came in soon after and noticed nothing.

I can hear the whistle. Quick march! We shook ourselves. . . . That was a never-to-be-forgotten moment.

I was in the rear of the section. I considered our column; expressions and attitudes at that moment imprinted themselves on my memory. Fifteen yards in front at the head of the section Guillaumin was marching along with his usual swing. I ran an eye over my half-sections. Here were Gaudéreaux and Trichet; there was Judsi, the buffoon, giving an

imitation of the goose step; Lamalou with his *képi à la Knut*. Lorient, the man with the rupture, gloomy and already dragging his leg along affectedly; my corporals, Donnadieu, a little pale, sandy-haired man gripping the butt of his rifle convulsively. Bouguet, extremely fit, turning round to see that all his men were there.

It gave one the impression of a holiday parade. I have mentioned the windows decorated with bunting, the men's rifles and packs too were ornamented with little flags. And the flowers! In one section, Trichet, who was a gardener by trade, had procured great bundles of them. They had been distributed among the different half-sections. The other sergeants had been given roses or dahlias by their men. I had been forgotten, and when Bouillon, who was annoyed about it, had brought me some geraniums just as we were starting, I refused them with thanks! Quite unnecessary! I alone was clear-headed. You would have thought that I alone knew to what a sinister revel we were hastening.

Left! Right! We were all marching at the same pace, towards our mysterious destiny. For how many of us had Fate signed the order of arrest! I tried to pick out the first victims. Was it that block-head—Henry, I think, they called him—who would be picked up in a fortnight's time, with his leg or head torn off? A big dark fellow was laughing, showing his teeth in a huge guffaw. I mentally put him down as not being one of those who would come back. This ghastly game fascinated me.

On getting to the main street we halted for a time and waited to take our place in the regiment. The bugles passed by.

Sol mi: Sol do!
La classe s'en va!

Then we followed the stream.

A line had formed three-deep along each pavement. All F——, all the neighbouring country was crowded there. Our departure effected the country even more than that of the regulars. These men from twenty-five to thirty years old were the married youth, who had taken root and founded a family. Drawn up in the doorways, or leaning from the windows, women and children, with all their heart, were shouting:

“Long live the 3rd . . . !”

A territorial called out:

“Halloa boys? We're coming on the day after to-morrow!”

“Hm! At a safe distance!” Judsi retorted gaily.

The men waved and smiled at their relations and friends who had come up, but nothing further; there was no chance of hanging behind, or falling out. Even Judsi soon gave up his tomfoolery; each one felt instinctively that a brave bearing would influence the people's confidence.

The clamour round us continued to increase:

“Long live France! Long live the 3rd. . . .”

The distant voice of the bugles only reached us in snatches now, but we marched in step all the same. The collective excitement went to my head. I marched with my eye fixed in front of me, my rifle glued to my shoulder, a soldier among these soldiers.

When we got into the Avenue de la Gare, I caught sight of De Valpic, guide to the 2nd section. He had half-turned round, and was leaning to one side, with an anxious expression. I suddenly thought of his

water-bottle, filled just as we were leaving. Drops must be trickling from it now at every step.

I was ashamed of myself. I despised myself. If I did not go quite as far as to vow to make amends for this villainy—and how I should have set about it I do not know—at least I swore that it should be my last; yes, the very last.

I was going to be born anew, and quite different. My heart was beating more warmly. Carried away by the rapidity of the pace, uplifted by the untiring acclamations of the crowd, it seemed to me that I was out-distancing the man I had been.

PART II

BOOK IV

August 9th-12th

CHAPTER I

UNDER WAY

THE bugle sounded. We might get out.

Versailles. How these platforms swarmed! Ten convoys, like ours, with their carriages decorated in the same way with flags and branches of green leaves, scribbled over with harmless inscriptions and caricatures, had turned out, topsyturvy, this crowd of soldiers in chequered uniforms. The hubbub was tremendous. Everyone seemed in the best of spirits. There were flowers in every cap. We were forbidden to go far. As a matter of fact, no one thought of such a thing, we had to take care not to lose our company, and section. We hardly ventured as far as the fountains of drinking water. Having awaited my turn for it, I went up just after Judsi. I actually felt inclined to smack him on the back, he was so tantalising with his trick of drinking with his lips glued to the tap.

Guillaumin told me when I joined him that the halt was to last for an hour. We might take a turn! We amused ourselves for a moment, by watching

some horses being entrained—by no means an easy job. They were hoisting them in with slings. Their place of export was marked "Remount dépôt Saint-Lô." Guillaumin nudged me with his elbow.

"Some concentration, what!"

It was true. All the Brittany lines, most of those from Normandy and Atlantic coast, converged there, bringing with them the blood of a third, or almost a third, of France.

We got back into the train. Evening was coming on. Guillaumin and I were to keep order in the truck; forty men in our charge. To begin with everyone had submitted to the restrictions concerning the arrangement of packs and rifles. Now the confusion began. A lot of them had got hold of their packs again to make a pillow, and most of them began to shed their equipment.

Lamalou set about moving the seats. I interfered. He began to argue about it. Guillaumin had to join in, and Bouillon too.

We started off again. Were we going to skirt Paris on the north or the south? We soon found out. The train approached the gradient at Buc. We watched in vain for some aeroplanes. Judsi exclaimed:

"Wot are you thinkin' of! They've all gone orf to Berlin!"

There were brief stops at small stations. The same scene was [repeated every time: idlers crowding up to the railings to cheer us and we replying with shouts of "Death to the Bosches!" "Down with the Kaiser!" solely out of politeness, in order not to disappoint all these people who had waited so long. There was no longer the frank enthusiasm there had

been just now on leaving F——. The men were getting tired. The Red Cross members who distributed chocolate, fruit, and postcards in profusion were no longer hailed with the same delight. Lorient and Lamalou ended by grumbling because they were so stingy with the wine.

The night fell, and with it what was left of cheerfulness. Judsi was the last to give in. He picked out well-known airs and set new words to them, ineffable drivel, beyond all description, and probably of his own composition. The coarsest sallies still raised a few laughs. These echoes of an inane merriment were becoming quite unbearable.

I thought of shutting the men up altogether. Guillaumin dissuaded me from doing so:

“Take care you don't get yourself disliked!”

It was getting dark. Corporal Donnadiou lit the section lantern. Where was it to be hung? To that hook in the middle of the ceiling. It swung backwards and forwards giving a flickering light.

Everyone was making preparations now, for going to sleep. A small number occupied the seats, the rest were stretched on the floor. They formed tangled groups in the shadows. Good-humoured elbow digs and expostulations were exchanged.

Guillaumin had lain down beside me, with his own head on his pack, and that of one of his corporals fitted between his knees. He became expansive and exclaimed:

“How's this for up-to-date comfort!”

It was a stifling evening. I was hot and uncomfortable, as I had not even had the courage to undo my belt. We had had a cold supper. The smell of cheese and sausage still hung about. It was the first

taste of the promiscuousness. As long as the two doors were open, the atmosphere was breathable. But here was Bouguet, who had just lain down, shouting:

“What do you say to shutting the door. There’s a beastly draught.”

Some coarse aside of Judsi’s raised roars of merriment.

Lamalou sat up.

“Let’s shut the door.”

I shouted from the end of the carriage:

“Steady on! You must leave room for a little air to get in!”

Lamalou took no notice.

“Didn’t you hear?” asked Bouillon. “The sergeant’s orders were to leave it open!”

Bouguet objected.

“Do you want us all to catch our death of cold, sergeant? Besides it’s the rule that doors must be kept shut at night.”

Guillaumin raised himself, and whispered to me:

“The chap’s quite right, you know!”

“How’s that?”

“The *poilus* will roll off into the scenery when they go to sleep.”

This prospect was disquieting. I said no more, but let them do as they liked. A minute afterwards I complained of the stuffiness.

“Why not have the ventilator opened?” Guillaumin suggested.

“What ventilator?”

He was obliging enough to get up and feel about to find the bolt. The shutter slid along in the groove. A scrap of sky showed through, and some fleecy clouds

shining in the moonlight. I announced that I should like to spend my night at the window.

"Are you quite off your chump? Try to have a snooze!"

"I'm not sleepy."

I groped along avoiding the slumberers and reached the seat near the wall. I succeeded in pulling myself up, and leaning my elbows on the opening, I breathed in the delicious night air.

Our convoy was crawling along at a monotonous pace, through the darkness. It seemed of an immoderate length, dark from end to end, except in the centre, where the light from the officer's saloon shone on the ballast. By leaning out while we went round the curves I could make out the fire in the engine, a curtain of purple, with fantastic shadows moving against it. Our whistle often blew, and others answered stridently from the distance. The regular clank of the wheels on the rails was audible, and a minute red dot could sometimes be seen at the end of a straight piece of line—the tail light of the train ahead of us.

There were thousands of fleecy clouds scattered over the sky, all lit up on the same side by the pale rays of the moon. We were leaving the Vallée de la Bièvre. The surrounding country was growing flat. A far-spreading horizon soon became visible beyond the open fields. Then the radiance of Paris rose into sight.

It was impossible to mistake it for the translucent band of a mysterious, tender blue which still lingered in the west. It resembled rather the afterglow of a sunrise or of a huge fire. The silhouettes of houses and trees stood out in the foreground like Chinese shadows against the glowing distance.

The City of Light! I revelled in the vision and the symbol, both equally imposing. What a part this city had played in history! How feverishly she throbbed to-day. I blamed myself for having failed to take advantage of the magnificent opportunity which had been within my reach the other day. Ought I not, with more fellow-feeling and enthusiasm, to have mixed with the crowd, and roamed day and night in search of the secret of Paris, which was also the secret of France! I remembered the boulevards brilliant in their multi-coloured lights, the crowd crushing against the windows of the big daily papers. . . .

Fresh news would be appearing on the tapes at this hour. What would it be? We had not been able to get a paper all day, but a persistent rumour had reached us: "Mulhouse!" . . .

Was it a prelude to victory? Was Paris illuminated? Perhaps. . . . But what if it were one of those ephemeral successes? What evil presentiment enslaved me? Was I still under Fortin's influence? (Fortin who was never mentioned now except in a whisper. We knew he was confined to his cell: awaiting trial by Court Martial.)

Paris! Why should I dream of defeat? Paris, our head and our heart! Paris as hostage! As martyr perhaps! I pictured the horde of Barbarians pitching their tents in the country we were slipping through, turning their guns on to the glittering capital. Where would their fury end? What would be left of these buildings, this glory, which seemed destined for immortality? These were gloomy visions. Sick at heart, I longed with more ardour than I had lately longed for anything on earth, for the miraculous miscarriage of this probability.

If there was one thing at which I was astonished, it was at not finding most of my companions at the ventilators like myself. To send Paris a last greeting! They must all, or nearly all, be feeling that all they counted dear, was shut up within those walls. I who had no one there—nor anywhere else either for that matter—this thought shook me. Nobody. My father? Was a stranger, as I have already said. I thought nevertheless of his farewell, of his fugitive tenderness, due to obscure ties of the blood. Who else was there? Laquarrière? If he thought of me it would certainly be to congratulate himself on being safely in shelter, while I was risking. . . . Nobody. There really was nobody!

And yet my eyes probed the darkness, my glance was unconsciously drawn in a certain direction. . . . In that suburb, I could imagine a street, a house, . . . in that house someone . . . someone who had written!—"We think of you a great deal. . . ."
An idle dream and one which passed.

There was a metallic rattle. We were crossing the Seine. Still a few more miles to go, through the dark countryside. An important station was coming soon. Myriad lamps lit up countless railway lines.

Our speed slackened, till we slowed down to a walking pace. We slowly skirted endless pavements. I could distinguish retreating uniforms and piles of arms. An artillery sentry gave me a friendly wave.

"What station do you come from?" I shouted to him.

"Marseilles!" he replied.

His warm Southern accent had made me start. How many convoys had he seen rolling past in the

same direction during the few hours he had been there with his battery. The concentration! The idea of this gigantic operation made one think: these trains whose time-tables had been arranged months, no years, in advance, these hundreds upon hundreds of trains flashing across the country in every direction; skirting gulfs and mountains, crossing the rivers, flowing in from every extremity of France, carrying the immense masses of war material, and the harvest of young men. Caught up in this huge mechanism, this invisible unity, what a small thing I was, for all my pride of intellect!

A new tack soon threw us off the main lines. I occasionally turned round to look into the interior of the carriage, where the men were sleeping, livid beneath the swinging lantern, like corpses, I thought, at the bottom of a sunken submarine.

I stayed like this for a long time, half-awake and half-dreaming. In what direction were we going? To Maubeuge? Or Châlons? I remember a long stop in the middle of the night on a siding on the outskirts of Noisy-le-Sec.

Some of the men were awake, eating bread and cheese. I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Well, are you going to make up your mind to it?" Guillaumin asked me.

"To what?"

I yawned.

"To take a nap. Why you're so sleepy you can hardly stand up! Come along and lie down!"

"Where? There's no room!"

"What about my place?"

I declined it with thanks. He insisted. Oh, come along! It was his turn to take the air!

Very well. I gave in. We started off again. The outlook was no longer so attractive. The glow of Paris had faded into the distance, and the moon had just sunk behind the deep blue horizon.

CHAPTER II

HARASSED, ALREADY

WHEN I woke, dawn was stealing in by the door which was once more open. Judsi had installed himself at it, his legs dangling outside. We all looked the worse for wear and had puffy faces.

Where were we? It was dreary, barren country, an indefinite switchback of bald ridges. The rocky part of Champagne apparently. Exactly. A few minutes later our train drew up at Rheims.

The weather was dull and drizzly. We felt cold when we got out: the men began to stamp their feet. We N. C. O.'s joined up together. Descroix and Humel complained bitterly of stiffness. The filthy carriages! Must have been made on purpose for us! Everyone was sighing for his coffee. Guillaumin preached patience. Frémont had wandered off to scribble a letter. De Valpic was pale and silent and heavy-eyed.

I left them and went in search of some clean water. When I came back, tidied up and much refreshed, coffee had been brought. The tin drinking cups were plunged at will into the "dixkeys." It was scalding! A real treat! There was "rooty" too. And the sun came out: we were reviving.

Soon, a circle formed round Lieutenant Henriot.

In order to make himself pleasant Playoust had put certain questions to him concerning the strategical situation. The other at once owned that he had had certain hints from the colonel—oh, it was official then!—certain indications . . .

I drew near. He spread out a map on a seat, and began to speak with great fluency. . . . I tried for a moment to follow him, but disobliging shoulders got in the way. He was pointing out certain landmarks and routes, and giving the names of towns and villages. It was all a closed book to me! I got tired of it and went off; I was inclined to mistrust these perorations by a subaltern.

Our train was shunted back, and we started again. I was tired and peevish, and fumed at the length of our journey. Eighteen hours already, and we were nowhere near the end!

Our destination still remained a mystery, a problem which disquieted us.

Guillaumin plumped for Sedan, and worried me to tell him what I thought.

"What on earth does it matter to me?"

"Do you think they'll come back as far as that?"

To annoy him, I said:

"Sure to!"

He exclaimed:

"Well, to be going on with, you know we're at Mulhouse! Absolutely official!"

On the outskirts of Ste.-Menehould, there was a prolonged halt, without permission to get out. Another convoy was standing on a side line. There were some *poilus* on the platform. Bouillon drew attention to their regimental numbers. They belonged

to our division. The men at once called to each other, and asked them to join in a drink. Everyone was delighted. It seemed little short of marvellous to find neighbours from their part of the world, Beaucerons, so far from home!

A new start. The country was becoming hilly and picturesque. There were some gorges and then a long tunnel. There was no more doubt about the direction we were taking! Corporal Bouguet, who had served his term with the 4th, was most emphatic: we were taking a bee-line to Verdun!

Good! the idea of fighting under the shelter of a powerful fortress was not displeasing.

Two hours more. The valley of the Meuse was reached, Verdun attained, and then left behind. . . . The deuce! Were they going to detrain us at the frontier in the first line . . . ?

No, a few miles farther on, the train stopped in the depths of the country. There was a bugle call, and Henriot shouted:

“Here we are!”

“Where?”

“At Charny, the terminus. Out you get! And no disorder, you understand!”

In three minutes we were on the ground, arms and baggage and all.

The captain passed by.

“You’re not over-tired?”

Lamalou thumped his chest.

“In the pink, sir!”

“So much the better, because you’ve got a nice little walk before you!”

Some long faces were pulled. It was nearly midday. We had had nothing to eat and the heat was killing.

"Now we return to business!" said Judsi.

We went into the neighbouring field through a gap in the hedge. Gaudéreaux bent down and picked up a clod of earth. He sniffed at it.

"Pooh!" he said. "It ain't up to ours!"

The lieutenant heard him, and reproved him for it.

"It's the same thing, it's French soil. It's what we are going to be killed for."

Did he count on producing an effect? The other gazed at him, dumbfounded!

A little walk indeed! I chewed the word with rage during the seven hours that this march lasted. Did they think it was the right way . . .? The right way to discourage the men!

No respite except the hourly halts, and they managed to cheat over them, by not whistling until the hour, or an hour and five minutes was up, or cutting them short by two minutes!

If there was one thing that astonished me it was the goodwill and endurance, which I saw manifested all round me. "Grouse," the first day? Oh no, that was out of the question! A praiseworthy resolution! When going through the villages, the men found a way, even when absolutely done up, of putting on a spurt, and making eyes at all the pretty girls!

Judsi sang snatches of very doubtful songs, which made some of them laugh, while others, their more flighty sisters, blew us kisses.

Corporal Bouguet all at once started a marching song: the men joined in the chorus: the captain did not interfere, but the commanding officer came rushing up, a pot-bellied puppet, perched up on his big horse. Oh, come along! What was all this? Would they

shut up? Would they never think of the war as something to be taken seriously?

This rating was upsetting. Another incident helped to damp their spirits. The distracted group we passed on the roadside . . . a lieutenant, a corporal, the cyclist, and an auxiliary medical officer, surrounding a man stretched on the ground, a reservist who had just fallen out. I caught sight of a violet face and glassy eyes.

The rumour spread that it was a fit.

The name of the man was soon discovered; he belonged to the 21st company, and was named Gaspard Métairie, a coppersmith from F——. Dead? Oh, yes! lying there like a log! I listened to the men's remarks. Poor wretch! It made one's heart bleed. So soon. And so stupidly. If it had been some of the Bosches' work there would have been nothing to be said. But like that! Simply tired out! Fathers of families, just think! Carrying the full weight! . . . But what was the good of fussing? The war would not be over this evening!

"Oh, a lot they care wot becomes of us," Lorient said. "I'm done, I am!"

He retired on to the footpath.

"What's the matter now?" I shouted to him.

"No good. Can't go on!"

"What can't go on?"

"I can't. I'm an old trooper, I am!"

He stopped and tried to sit down. The whole column slowed down, much interested and amused.

"March up, confound you!"

The captain overtook us.

"What's up?"

My nerves were on edge. I don't know what put

the whim into my head, but I gave a dry description of the scene at which I had assisted, the verdict given by the Medical Officer, and the man's recriminations, swearing that he would make a point of falling at the first shot.

Loriot was hugging himself and pretending to be in awful pain.

The captain did not pronounce an opinion.

"Stay with him, Sergeant; you will report him to the Medical Officer."

So we waited. Loriot sulking and livid with rage. I irritated at the thought that this task ought to have fallen to Playoust, the sergeant of the day.

The companies, as they marched past included us in the same glance of ironical pity.

Surgeon-Major Bouchut recognised his "client," as he called him, at the first glance.

"Ah! It's hurting you, is it? Easy enough to say so! I can't examine you here. Come along, jump in there! We shall soon see!"

Under my very eyes, Loriot hoisted himself up into the ambulance, settled himself down comfortably, and began to chat with the orderlies.

Infuriated by my own stupidity and the delay it had cost me, I hurried on.

The road went up and up. I began to experience the smothered sensation in the shoulders and chest caused by having to carry a pack. Every hundred yards—and what a bore it was—the buckle of my sling came undone, as the point was blunted and did not catch properly, and the rifle slipped. An inconvenience which could not be remedied, and which seemed likely to pursue me throughout the campaign. It was about four o'clock; the sun was still blazing,

drops of perspiration gathered inside the men's caps and occasionally trickled on to the ground. To think that this march was nothing: mere child's play.

The worst of it was that just as I was about to catch the others up, my right foot began to feel sore. I remembered that the evening they had delivered these boots. . . . At the first halt I quickly took off both boot and putties.

The inspection filled me with consternation. I had hoped my stocking alone was responsible for it. . . . Not at all, there was no irksome fold. It was the counter right enough. What was to be done? The fatal blister was gathering. The prospect of hours of atrocious pain stared me in the face. The little courage I had oozed away.

I was dying of thirst; I poured out a cupful. The water was warm, but it refreshed me all the same. Catching sight of De Valpic, lying down with sunken cheeks, I went up to him.

"De Valpic?"

He opened his eyes.

"Will you have . . . a drink?"

"But you . . .?"

"I've got plenty, don't you worry. I noticed . . . your water-bottle is leaking, isn't it?"

"Yes, I don't know how it happened. It's very troublesome."

"Hand me your drinking cup. There now. Wait a minute!" I half-filled it for him, added a few drops of Ricqles, and pulling my messtin out of my haversack offered him some sugar. He took two pieces, but greedily drank a mouthful without waiting for it to melt.

"Thanks; my throat was so terribly parched."

A wave of red flooded his cheeks.

"You're a good sort, Dreher."

I sat down beside him and asked him in a friendly way whether he was not awfully tired?

"I look it, don't I?"

"Oh! Just like everyone else!"

The whistle blew! I left him.

"Cheer up!"

But at the next pause I avoided looking in his direction. There was only enough water for me.

A few more miles. The men were grumbling quite openly now. From time to time one would fall out, and all at once, or little by little lose ground, and get left behind by the platoon. What was there to be said? I interfered no more. These fellows had not had a bite since five o'clock that morning.

Were we to leave these stragglers their rifles, or not?

The subaltern said they were to be taken away.

The result was that those who remained threatened to give up in their turn. Two rifles to drag about, not much! They were quite willing to do their bit, but they were not going to be put upon, not them!

Lieutenant Henriot changed his mind.

"Each man will keep his own rifle!"

"Too late now. How are we to find the owners of them all?"

He got scared.

"I was wrong. I made a mistake!" he repeated.

Guillaumin reassured him by saying all the *poilus* were sure to turn up.

One would have thought that it all amused him, the long day's march, the hunger and thirst,—everything. He kept on joking—rather too familiarly perhaps—with Lamalou and Judsi and those of our men who still

held out. He even took it into his head to talk theatres to me! I soon sent him off with a flea in his ear, as may be imagined. He did not notice for some time that I was limping.

"Foot hurting you?"

"Yes."

He offered to carry my pack. I was on the point of allowing him to, but Lamalou, who was watching me furtively, jeered.

"Halloa, Sergeant! You following poor Lorient's example?"

"No. I've got a sore foot," I said; "but I am going to stick to it all right."

On my refusal Guillaumin took on another lame dog's pack. Lamalou soon followed his example.

I only kept on automatically. My heel must be quite raw. Perhaps I was risking the fate of my whole campaign. It couldn't be helped. In my heart of hearts I almost congratulated myself on this opportunity of escape.

We ended by breaking all ranks. Sections, platoons, and companies were all mixed up. We were just a herd, and at the entrance to a little hamlet when the order was passed down to shoulder arms no one budged. Not much! We're not so green as all that! Give us a bite o' some'at first!

But it was not to be so lightly disregarded! The captain rode down what remained of our column, and repeated the order, brandishing his whip furiously. The men made up their minds to obey it. We found out the reason for it afterwards. . . . A general surrounded by his staff, was watching us march past . . . someone whispered that it was the general in command of the division.

It was unfortunate that this should be his first experience of us. He took stock of us superciliously; his forehead puckered in a frown of disillusionment. The men growled.

"Like to see you in our place, old chap, with an empty stomach, and a pack on your back!"

Oh, that arrival at our billets in Orne, a village of five hundred inhabitants, already overflowing with troops of all kinds. Oh, how depressed we were, both physically and morally. I was especially exhausted. There was a complete lack of any spirit of organisation among the authorities, and the troops were totally out of hand. We were obviously worth nothing at all!

Where and how did the men get food? Guillaumin luckily took charge of the whole section. I believe he bustled about, got hold of the mess-corporal, and was the first to arrive with a fatigue party, at the issue of rations which took place in the market-square towards midnight.

I had sacrificed my "posse," but I still had some bread and hard-boiled eggs left that I had brought with me from F—. I took off my accoutrements and boots and installed myself in the best corner of the stable reserved for our lot, and slept on the straw till five o'clock next morning.

CHAPTER III

IN BILLETS

THE weather next day was glorious. A fine rain had fallen. The men now very clean and spruce, wandered about the village, with their caps cocked over their ears.

No danger threatened. No one would have thought we were at war. And as for the Bosches, let them go hang! The natives had certainly said, shaking their heads, that they had already seen some Uhlans on the neighbouring hills. Absurd inventions. A dragoon whom we questioned burst out laughing in our faces. The Bosches! They had indeed been across the frontier for twenty-four hours or so, over there towards Longwy. They were soon sent to the right-about. We might sleep in peace! We had the regulars in front of us, about twenty regiments of them!

Some trenches had been dug at the approaches to the village, the 21st had spent the night in them. It was one of the regular amusements to go and look over them during the day-time. They were very unconvincing, casually hewn out and occupied. Orne's defensive organisation! Who could take it seriously?

"Blowed if I don't think our good time's beginning," said Judsi.

The villagers were really delightful. These poor dwellers by the Meuse! They did not have much of a time afterwards. Who would not have become embittered in their place? At the outset we were touched by their cordial, almost friendly reception. Many of us went in search of a bed. I believe that but few were found which did not already boast an occupant. Lamalou's experience was a case in point. Other attachments were formed. On the other hand, Playoust came to grief—the thing became known immediately—with the grocer's pretty wife. He revenged himself by attributing the mishap to the regimental sergeant-major.

The outstanding feature—which never varied throughout the campaign—was the catering. We N. C. O.'s messed together. But Descroix and his lot were already dissatisfied with this arrangement and suggested that each platoon should fend for itself.

I was doubtful about this, but Guillaumin took me aside.

“Leave them alone! It will suit us much better!”

He explained that he had made a great find in the shape of a top-hole cook, a real professional. He had been chef at Bernstein's!!! The fellow would perhaps consent to cook for three or four, but not a word!—or the officers would appropriate him. He made me acquainted with the prodigy, Gaufreteau, a smooth-skinned, cold creature, very much on his dignity, who would not bind himself in any way.

Our comrades had managed somehow or other to get hold of some wine at twenty-four sous the litre, good pale Lorraine wine, on which they feasted among themselves. You had to pay two francs everywhere else for a much inferior quality.

Guillaumin determined he would not be outdone, and went off in search of it. He ended by coming back triumphant, bringing the same wine at 1 franc 20, and the wine merchant was to have the bottles back!

He poured out several bumpers and made fun of De Valpic for refusing to take any. I suggested adding some water to it. He ragged me in turn.

"What are you afraid of? If we've got to be knocked out at this job, at least let's have our money's worth first!"

This coarse tomfoolery maddened me. Was it an attitude of mind assumed for war-time, to match that of those poor brutes of troopers. I sarcastically twitted him with it. He was not at all annoyed.

"Just what I'm trying for!"

Thereupon he invited his corporals and mine to empty new bottles. I could not leave him in the lurch. All these people were drinking and rotting with him round the table in the kitchen of our farm. The place was filled with the smell of burning fat. What a scene, and what a pastime! I was bored to death.

"I'll see you later!" I said, and went off making some excuse. I should have liked to meet Fortin or someone of that calibre. A pity they'd left him at F——, but perhaps it might be lucky for him.

I took a turn round the neighbouring billets. Nothing but men lying about and a lot of them had spread into the fields round about, and were taking a nap in the shade.

My foot was better. I had painted it with tincture of iodine that morning and the day before.

I got out of the village without any difficulty. A sentry, far from stopping me, asked me for some tobacco.

A hill near by attracted me. I hoped to get a good view of the surrounding country from the top. My ideas on the topography of the neighbourhood were singularly confused. I knew the distance from Orne to Verdun, 18 km. 7., and I was inclined to think the Valley of the Meuse must lie somewhere near to southwards.

My walk was not at all satisfying. From the summit I had aimed at, I could see nothing but another ridge, crowned with a dark fringe of trees. There was no outlet through which I could get a view. I came back, tired and disappointed. Up there I had tried for a moment to give rein to my imagination. Here is my country—Lorraine, I said to myself, and I looked in vain for that serene melancholy, that voluptuous calm, in the landscape. . . . It was obviously yet another example of poetic exaggeration. It was not unpleasing country, but it was more like—oh, anything you like to name, Perche, or the country round Paris.

I went back. On the way I heard myself hailed from behind a hedge. It was Playoust's voice. I went up and found the whole set of sergeants from the 22nd. De Valpic alone was missing. I was surprised to catch sight of Guillaumin, with cards in his hands.

"What! You don't mean to say you're playing?" I said.

"Yes, they're teaching me!"

He explained with great gusto that they had come to fetch him to make up a second four (Frémont was there too). He had no gift for it. But he was sticking to it all the same. He had already lost one and threepence!

"And what about you, old boy? Do you know their blooming game?"

"Yes," I replied coolly, "but it doesn't appeal to me, you know!"

I did not linger. I bore him a grudge. If he was going over to that lot he was quite at liberty to do so, of course, but he need no longer count, as a matter of course, on my society—Oh dear, no!

I went to lie down. I yawned. I was bored to tears.

For the sake of something to do I emptied my pockets of their miscellaneous contents.

On pulling out the packet of letter cards which I had brought quite by chance, I thought: Hello, why should n't I write a letter?

But to whom should it be?

Not to my father. I had nothing to tell him.

As for my brother, I had not even got his complete address. I did not know what company he was in. My brother Victor! . . . Why should I be thinking of him particularly just now? . . . Where was he? . . . Somewhere in the Woevre. Not very far from me, no doubt.

What spirits was he in? War was the dream of their life, their goal, their one passion, to all these soldiers. What a bizarre idea it was. Simply a case of suggestion! What did they hope for from it, after all? For the space of a second I had a strikingly clear vision of him, calm and resolute, with his cap well down over his eyes, issuing his orders.

The idea again occurred to me of writing to someone—whom I knew. But I counted on my fingers; it was only three days; and it would be better to wait until I had something worth writing about.

When I went out again I found myself face to face with Henriot.

"Halloa, how are you getting on, Dreher?" he said.

"Pretty well, sir!"

"Pity we get no papers!"

I saw that he was bursting to have a talk, and, by Jove, it would be good policy to get on good terms with my immediate chief once and for all. I need only imitate Playoust; I asked him slyly what he thought was happening.

He needed no persuasion! He was fully aware of the fact that I had not been among his audience the day before, and ingenuously expressed his regret. De Valpic and I, he said, were the two best-read men in the company. He would so much like to exchange ideas with us!

As for exchanging ideas, all I was aiming at was to get him to trot his out . . . to get at him in that way. At my request he went to fetch a map of the whole of our eastern frontier.

I led him on to various subjects which I wished to explore, without taking great pains about it: the composition of our army, the probable figure of our effectives, our system of fortified towns.

He replied at length, furnishing information collected and classed without much sense of criticism. He placed the ideas he had gleaned from the special courses for officers, on the same level with those picked up in certain technical reviews, and a great number of commonplaces borrowed from the daily papers.

But he fancied himself particular on the questions of strategy.

The German scheme was done for! Everything was based, you see, on the complicity or, at all events,

the passivity of Belgium. They had concentrated four army corps in their camps in advance, Trèves, Malmédy, Atles-Lager. They would have hurled them simultaneously on to the left bank of the Meuse, and they could have gone straight ahead across the flat country. In five days they would have been in the Scheldt, on the way to Valenciennes. They would have reached the valley of the Oise, and from there have gone on to Paris. And it might quite likely have succeeded! . . .

He warmed to his subject.

They came to grief. The Belgians have demolished forty thousand men, a whole army corps. The English have had time to land, and we to fall into line. And what do you say to our retort in Alsace the other day? We are getting the entire control of affairs into our hands.

His forefinger indicated Mulhouse.

Look, we're back there again and firmly based there, for good, believe me! It's obviously ours. Take Strassburg? No, not at once. Invest it perhaps, that's all. But push straight on across the Rhine. It's not so easy, but we should spare nothing in order to do that! Just think! Once past the Rhine all we should have to do would be to go straight ahead, and cut Germany in half. Separate the Northern Provinces under Prussia, from Bavaria, which is not nearly so antagonistic to us really, and the Russians, after having taken Cracow and Prague, will soon be shaking hands with us!

He stopped talking and wiped his forehead. Gazing at his map he seemed to regret that it did not include the theatre of to-morrow's victories.

I gazed at him with surprise and mistrust. But he

seemed so sure of his ground! I knew these theories were current in higher military circles. These daring anticipations reminded me of those expressed so many times in my presence by my father and brother.

How the thought of Victor pursued me! I could not restrain myself from mentioning him.

"Oh! What is he in?" said Henriot. ,

"The 161st St. Mihiel."

"A crack regiment that!"

"Have they been in action yet?"

"Probably!"

"And what about us?" I said. "Do you think we shall soon be engaged?"

"I should hardly think so. What is there ahead of us? Luxembourg. They violated it on August 2nd. A lot of good it did them! Their offensive turned northwards. Now they've got to defend themselves. I don't think they'll attempt anything much against the Stenay gap. I don't think we're much exposed!"

So much the better! I thought.

"I personally should have liked to fight in this part of the country."

"Do you come from near here?"

"Yes, from Villers-sur-Meuse, about fifty miles from here."

He added a few details. It was only his second post, and he asked for nothing better than to stay there as long as possible. His father had been master there before him, and was buried there.

We are Lorrains, you see, that's why I made such a point of being in the reserves.

I asked him naively if he had ever thought of war.

"What! We never thought of anything else!"

I suddenly recognised in him, the obstinacy and

exaltation which had surprised me, as a child, in the inhabitants of Emberménil.

I had honestly forgotten that such rancour survived. After more than forty years! Revenge then was not simply an abstract pretext, it corresponded actually, to a desire, a hatred! The old furnace still threw out sparks in the new generation capable of setting the conflagration alight at any moment.

I could not help blaming this fury. The stupid dislike of resignation and discretion, of that which constituted men's happiness.

Did I not, however, vaguely envy this impassioned tone and face?

Why did I announce:

"I'm a Lorrain too, you know!"

"Really?" he said; "Oh well, I had suspected it, just from your name. What part do you come from?"

I told him. He was delighted. He had relations round about Lunéville.

"We are the only ones in the platoon. That ought to make us good friends, what?"

I felt that he was moved. I pretended to be. But I was chilled again. I only thought like the other evening, under my father's gaze: "I a Lorrain! In what am I a Lorrain?" And the idea that I should have brothers and foes, just because I was born on this side, and not on that side of a certain line, seemed to me grotesque.

It was about time for "cookhouse door" to go. Our card-players reappeared. I enjoyed first their surprise, then their only thin-veiled annoyance. It was particularly aggravating for the schoolmasters. Henriot, with his hand on my shoulder, was talking to me as to an intimate confidant. They began to

wander round, anxious to interrupt us, but withheld from doing so by their deeply-rooted respect for rank.

Great Heavens! if I had guessed what would put an end to our conversation!

Henriot stopped abruptly in the middle of a sentence.

"Hsh! What's that . . . ?"

"That dull distant rumble. . . ."

The men scattered about in the road and in the yard, were listening intently. Corporal Bouguet who was passing muttered:

"No, it can't be . . . ?"

It began again, like the echo of a peal of thunder. . . .

Then the subaltern pronounced the word I had expected:

"The guns!"

"What?"

It ran along repeated from mouth to mouth. The guns! The guns! I shuddered with physical anguish. A battle in progress over there, quite near by, which I felt would draw us in and swallow us up. The guns! Were they the ones which would make a pulp of my body?

Guillaumin suddenly appeared and seized me by the arm.

"My heart's beating. How queer it is!"

I was stupid enough to swagger.

"It reminds me of the Camp of Châlons!"

CHAPTER IV

AN ALARM

THE guns went on growling at intervals for an hour, and then stopped. Have I explained that our company was quartered almost in the open? Too much in the open, apparently. The order came round for us to clear out, and to squeeze into the smaller of the two farms which we occupied.

Nothing could have been more uncomfortable than the stable, or rather the cattle-shed which fell to our platoon. It might even have been a pig-stye to judge by the stink! They had contented themselves with throwing a thin layer of straw on the litter of dung. The men grumbled: Lorient most of all. I went to see for myself, the others were in the same predicament. They were openly discussing the ill-feeling which was beginning to establish itself between the commanding officer and the captain. Every time there was a particularly filthy billet going, it would be for the 22nd!

I was hesitating about lying down when Guillaumin came up beaming.

"Breton certainly has a flair for comfortable quarters; there's no denying it. Do you know what they've rooted out? A hay-loft. And a clean one, too!

We'll have it all to ourselves. We must get hold of De Valpic."

We went to find him.

"Thanks, it's awfully good of you!"

He assured us, though, that he would prefer to sleep alongside some rick as it was fine to-night.

"You'll be frozen!"

"I shall get some fresh air!"

"As much as you could want!"

Guillaumin showed me the way. It was behind the outhouses. A ladder was leaning up against it. I caught sight of Playoust at the window. He drew his head in immediately. Descroix appeared.

"There's not room for two!" he shouted.

"How's that?"

Little Humel showed up beside him!

"Reserved for the first platoon! We invited Guillaumin, that's all!"

"Look here, what about me!" I said quite calmly.

"Impossible!"

I said to Guillaumin.

"You might have asked them before you came to fetch me!"

"Rot! They're fooling!" he said. "There's room in there for fifteen or twenty."

He gave me a shove.

"Get along up!"

I put my foot on the first rung and began to climb up. Humel had called for help. Descroix seized the ladder with both hands and shook it. I nearly took a toss.

"The brutal!"

I jumped down. The others up there were howling with laughter. If I was sickened by it, Guillaumin

appeared more so. He set to work to blackguard them, in language very much to the point. Playoust tried to appease them: "Why make such a fuss! I was so fond of being alone. It was very good of them to offer him a place! Why not bring the viscount along too straight away?"

"De Valpic? He's going to sleep in the open air!" Humel yelped.

"Very well, then; why can't Dreher do the same thing!"

I considered it useless to insist. I should manage all right, I said to Guillaumin, but I advised him most strongly to take advantage of the stroke of luck—as he was so thick with them!

Not at all! He protested that nothing on earth would induce him to desert me. It was shameful, the way they had treated me. On active service all ought to help one another. How delighted the Bosches would have been if they had witnessed the scene.

Playoust retorted by jeering at us and reaped an easy harvest of guffaws among his accomplices. Guillaumin unexpectedly seized the ladder, and carried it off. I went with him laughing, while infuriated shouts followed us.

We got back to our stable.

"For us the dung!"

"Yes, like Job."

The smell was sickening, and the worst of it was that my place had been taken. Judsi was lying there snoring. I felt about him, he shook himself and let off an impropriety, which made me recoil. Luckily my faithful Bouillon hailed me. He made himself small and I was able to squeeze between him and

Corporal Donnadiou, and with my handkerchief over my nose, I soon fell fast asleep

There was an alarm in the middle of the night. A sudden clamour was heard in *the* road and the click of bayonets. To arms! To arms!

We leapt to our feet and went out. Outside there was nothing but tumult and bustling, indescribable confusion, terrified creatures bumping up against each other and seizing each other by the throat. I know my heart was thumping. A night attack? Good Heavens! It was very astounding. . . . And yet the enemy was not far away. . . .

Five minutes of disorder and panic. We could not have offered the slightest resistance! What was happening? The captain had come down and was whistling incessantly. I groped about searching for my section and platoon. They were lost! This pale form! Lamalou, in shirt sleeves, by Jove, but armed, and shouting, and ready for anything. . . .

What was the matter after all? . . .

At last the riddle was solved by De Valpic, who told us that a horse had got loose on the outskirts of the village, and its owner, a dragoon, had run after it shouting:

“Olga! Olga!”

A too zealous sentry had thought he heard “To Arms!” that was all.

We laughed ourselves hoarse. But one person who was not at all pleased was the captain. Awakened at the first movements, he had come rushing up in haste, and had whistled, as I said. . . . Guillaumin and I were the only ones to answer. We were the only two sleeping with our men. The others were

in great difficulties. How were they to get down from the hay-loft without a ladder? In the dark! Jump? The regimental sergeant-major had sprained his foot slightly. . . . What! What! Had he been up there! He was the one to get the biggest wiggling. He was horribly upset about it.

An explanation which followed between Guillaumin and Descroix nearly ended in their coming to blows. Playoust egged them on. Breton and I had all we could do to keep them apart.

One thing pleased me; a step Frémont took.

"I was with them," he said; "forgive me. They are idiots, but I couldn't get down. They're all in my platoon. They would have led me such a life. You're not annoyed with me, I hope?"

"Not at all."

The remainder of the night was calmer. From four o'clock onwards, however, the distant sinister rumbling became noticeable again. There must be something serious doing, for this music to strike up again at dawn!

We soon began to stretch and get up. Thanks to my little pocket-glass, I discovered some strange eruptions on my face. They worried me. What could they be?

"Spiders, 'rooky,'" Bouillon announced jovially.

I was at the pump in a bound, and spent quite a long time washing and soaping myself. In my absence, coffee was prepared and handed round. When I came back there was nothing left but a few lukewarm dregs.

I blamed Bouguet for it.

"In future you'll see that my coffee is kept for me!" He kicked at this.

"I only have just enough for my section. Sergeant Donnadiou has one man less. It's his job to get yours."

I made enquiries. He was quite right.

CHAPTER V

A THUNDERBOLT

THE cannonade, which increased in intensity hour by hour, made that morning a time of agonising suspense. For me, at least. The men who had already got accustomed to the noise, paid no more attention to it.

The regimental sergeant-major had been round to inspect accoutrements. Some of the men were dropped on, poor Gaudéreaux among others, as he had been unlucky enough to forget a rag for his rifle.

He was ordered confinement to barracks, but went out all the same. Ravelli who had met him in the village had him arrested and taken to the guard-room where he was sentenced by the captain to four days' confinement.

Lamalou commiserated him quite openly.

"That's what it is to be so bloomin' good-natured. Like to see 'em darin' to put upon me like that!"

The regimental sergeant-major who overheard him gave him a furious look, but actually was afraid to say anything and only revenged himself by slyly warning him for the next fatigue.

In the afternoon Lieutenant Henriot came to have a chat with Guillaumin and me. I noticed his anxiety to cause no more jealousy. Catching sight of

Descroix and Humel who were getting some fresh air in the yard, he called them. In this way the circle became enlarged. Too much for me! I bolted.

When Guillaumin came to find me again, I put on a sarcastic tone:

“Thrilling, what?”

“Oh . . . quite interesting! You seemed to be listening all right yesterday!”

“Couldn’t help myself!”

I undertook to quote the conversation I had had the day before with the little subaltern. To be honest, I exaggerated grossly. I ridiculed poor Henriot, and put on a tremolo, to recall his words about his birthplace where he taught, where his father was buried.

It seemed as if Guillaumin only half liked this skit. He stopped me.

“He may not be a genius, but he’s quite a good sort.”

I was discontented with myself and with him.

I expected that we should be sent to relieve the 21st in the trenches. I was mistaken. It was the 23rd. Our turn was skipped. I don’t know why.

This cannonade which still persisted and seemed to be drawing nearer, unnerved me. Where were they fighting? What approximately were the lines of tactical defence.

De Valpic to whom I happened to put the question, informed me.

“The Loison and the Othain.”

“What are they?”

“Tributaries of the Meuse. They both join the Chiers, near Montmédy.”

“You are well up in it.”

He smiled; he was going in to lie down as usual. The firing was still going on. I said to Bouillon:

"We may be going up one of these days!"

"Where to?"

"Into the firing line."

"Good luck!"

"Really, good luck?"

"The sooner we go there, the sooner the war will be over!"

"But . . . supposing we stay there?"

"Oh well, one end's as good as another!"

Towards evening someone announced that there was a convoy of wounded on the road. Frémont happened to be beside me. I took him by the arm:

"Are you coming to have a look?"

He hesitated. I took him along.

In the principal street a string of carts was filing past, carrying unearthly beings with sunken eyes, and blackened, ravaged faces. They were silent and had dirty bandages, some on their heads and some on their arms.

Our *poilus* had hurried up, and were forming a hedge. They ventured to question those who seemed the least affected.

"Well, lads? So you've given 'em a knock?"

Most of them did not reply. A few shook their heads.

"Nothing to be done."

"More likely them?"

They made a painful impression. More carts followed, these last drawn at a foot's pace. Orderlies signed to us that they contained the badly wounded.

Their time was up. Why bother to transport them even?

A vehicle passed at a trot going in the opposite direction empty.

"What have you done with your cargo?" shouted another driver.

"Going to load up again! Poor lads, turned into corpses, they are!"

Frémont had turned very pale.

"Let's be off!" he murmured.

"Oh, rot!" I said rather fiercely. "Let's see as much as we can. . . . We may be in their place to-morrow."

He stayed. A low cart appeared, containing two stretchers. On one of them was an officer with a bloodless face. He had a compress on his neck which dripped dark blood. On the other there was a young beardless corporal, whose respiration was rapid but even. Although awake, he persistently kept his eyes closed. What could his wound be? The orderly gave an expressive glance. A great-coat which had been thrown over the man hung down at the knee-joints. His two legs were gone.

"No, no, come away!" Frémont repeated with a shudder.

The horror of it! And it might so easily have been my turn to agonise to-morrow! By the fault of the politicians who had let loose this war! I cursed the allotted task, the yoke laid on so many, and my own acquiescence.

Then my attention was distracted. An N. C. O. in the 30th who took an opportunity of getting out when his cart stopped—the horse had lost a shoe, I believe—asked for a drink. Someone offered him wine.

"No. Water!"

An uncanny voice, hoarse with fever. They

brought him some water. He drank large gulps of it. I watched him. What was the matter with him, with his dark ringed eyes and pinched, mask-like face, and his body bent so queerly!

He began to speak in short, staccato sentences. He described the engagement which had taken place the day before. The long wait in the trench under shell fire in the full glare of the sun. They had not seen the Bosches, but knew they were quite near by. The weariness and the enervation which increased as the day went on. The longing to be done with it, for the losses were becoming serious. The effect of the damned fairy tale accredited by the newspapers and even by the *communiqués*, according to which the enemy could never stand up against the bayonet. You could see the men half-pulling them out, the precious things, and looking at them longingly, so slim and sharp and shining . . .!

And then at the end of the day the stroke of madness . . .! Word had been passed along, no one knew where it started from, "Fix bayonets: Charge!" The order rolled on from company to company. They had got up man by man then in ranks . . . Forward! They had rushed out, they were covering the ground at a tremendous pace. They felt that their opponents were there, petrified. They were just on the point of falling upon them. They yelled. No retort. Quicker, quicker! It was really marvellous . . .!

But suddenly they realised their mistake. Too late. There was an echo of terror. Along this plantation of trees there was a river. They calculated it's width. Not very wide, but too wide to clear at a jump, all the same!

"The Othain?" I suggested.

"How should I know!"

And then—it was all pre-arranged of course!—then the enemy had opened fire with their machine guns at two hundred yards. They all flung themselves flat! . . . What a panic there had been. The men had thrown themselves desperately into the dark icy water, drowning themselves among the rushes under the very eyes of their companions. . . . The rest who had no entrenching tools with them, or packs either, were reduced to digging themselves in with their pocket knives and their nails. The enemy, who were coming nearer, calmly continued to ply their infernal "tea kettle" for a whole hour. The result being that there was not a man left out of the two battalions engaged. Not one, untouched! All killed or wounded!

"And what about you, Sergeant?" asked Donnadiou, the little red-haired corporal.

"Me?"

He pulled a wry face.

"Napoo'd!"

"How do you mean, napoo'd," I exclaimed.

"Yes, I've got a ball in my stomach—and as they have not operated——"

Ah! that explained his being so doubled up! He climbed back into his cart.

"Well, so long, you fellows. Hope you'll have better luck."

He added:

"Oh! it's blooming funny, this war!"

We were subdued and silent. Then Judsi jeered.

"Oh, dash it all, the bloke must be pilin' it on. We may 'ave been mauled a bit, likely as not, but wot about them—with our 75's——".

"You're right there," Bouillon exclaimed.

Another private, who was wounded in the arm, shouted gaily as he passed.

"The comedy's over for this child."

"Wot, you don't mean to say you're legging it after the first act, you waster?"

He had good reason to rejoice. I would have given all I possessed to be in that man's shoes.

After this, excitement reigned. The rumour spread that a start was near, in fact imminent. The subaltern assured them in vain that he knew nothing of it, that he did not think. . . . The men repeated the words picked up by the captain's orderly.

"Luckily there'll be a moon to-night!"

Curfew time arrived, however, without anything happening and we turned in.

But a little before midnight the quartermaster's voice was heard at the door.

"Turn out! Marching kit!"

We were in full harness in no time. I went out. I came across Henriot and asked him.

"Are we really off?"

"Yes, yes."

"Any news?"

"Hm! I've just had a talk with a subaltern who's come down from the Woevre."

"From what part exactly?"

"Flirey."

The name struck me. I remembered having heard it in my father's mouth.

"Is he still there, the subaltern you mentioned?"

"I think so; yes, look there!"

I caught sight of the silhouette of a cavalry officer.

I went up to him spurred on by a singular presentiment.

"I hear you've been near Flirey during the last few days, sir. . . ."

"Exactly."

I tried to make out his regimental number.

"Did you by any chance come across the 161st?"

"Rather! I was attached to them for rations for three days!"

I hesitated.

"You don't happen to remember a Lieutenant Dreher?"

He repeated:

"Dreher?"

"Yes."

"A big fair fellow; a good-looking chap?"

"Yes."

"His picket was surprised. He was killed!"

"No!"

"Excuse me; I saw him being carried away. He had a bullet in his head. Did you know him, Sergeant?"

BOOK V

August 12th-13th

CHAPTER VI

ON THE WAY TO THE FIRING LINE

My brother! My brother killed! I went off, without a word in reply, and lost myself in the darkness. I was stupefied. My brother killed! I was on the point of fainting. And then, in a few minutes, I regained my control. I had the impression of having advanced a stage; of an awakening.

Finished, and done with my rôle as onlooker in all these things. No more detached, distant pity for me like that with which I had been inspired by those dying men just now. How my blood rushed through my veins. I conjured up a vision of my brother alive, leading his men. I saw him totter and fall. They picked him up, stone dead! With a hole through his forehead! That was the end. There was no more to be done but to make the sign of the cross over all that remained of him!

Henriot passed me again, buckling the strap of his revolver. He asked me casually:

“Well, did you speak to him?”

I was on the point of saying to him.

On the Way to the Firing Line 185

"My brother . . . you know, my brother."

But a feeling of shyness prevented me, the idea of confiding in anyone was repugnant to me. . . . Guillaumin appeared in his turn, his képi worn square; I did not say anything to him either: the idea of forcedly conventional phrases sickened me.

We formed into platoons. Roll-call. Nobody missing in our lot.

The men were joking in spite of our instructions. Judsi's nasal intonations could be distinguished.

"Halloa, Loriot, you old rotter, you going to march? Didn't the M. O. recognise you?"

Each one's a bigger fool than the last!

Loriot shrugged his shoulders.

Corporal Donnadieu was the only one who looked thoughtful and absorbed. An agriculturalist, with delicate features, and a sandy moustache; I liked him for his conscientiousness and zeal. He suddenly turned to me, and said in a whisper:

"So we're going up to the front, you think, Sergeant?"

"I believe so."

"Already?"

"Already."

"How many will stay there?"

He looked as if he were reckoning up the number of victims around us. I said wearily:

"Oh, as to that!"

He was silent. I asked him if he was married.

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Any children?"

"One of fifteen months, and another . . . on the way!"

Looking down at the ground, he sighed.

"How stupid it is to fight!"

I thought how in our camp, and no doubt in the opposite camps too, nearly every individual was privately thinking the same thing! And yet each one bowed his head and went on. Poor human race!

We started off. The night was cool and clear. A good one to march on.

Guillaumin came to keep me company. He announced that he was in "the pink" and joked below his breath with his men and mine, whom he already knew better than I did. He forced me to share his good humour. It may be imagined that I did not rise much, though I avoided looking too anxious. I dreaded a direct question and intended to withdraw into myself alone with my sorrow.

He ended by getting tired of it and left me, but then it was the subaltern's turn to hang on to me. It was difficult to escape him. It was in vain that I purposely arranged to walk so that he was forced to the side of the road, where he kept stumbling over endless obstacles such as ruts and heaps of flints. He did not lose heart, and I had to put up with a new explanation of the situation. Then he tried to make out where we were. Every other minute I saw him consulting his map with the aid of his electric torch.

"Look, we're following this road."

He must have made a mistake, at some cross roads. Contrary to his expectation we did not cross the high road to Etain. Then he tried to take his bearings by the heavens, the Great Wain, and the Polar Star.

I no longer even pretended to take an interest. I thirsted for solitude. I took advantage of a moment when he left me to go to the captain, to sign to Bouillon. With this place filled, I was saved.

On the Way to the Firing Line 187

I went on automatically like a beast of burden. The weariness, and perspiration, the crushing weight of the pack, the bumping of the haversack and the water-bottle, the pressure of the crossed straps, all that combined, almost took away the consciousness of existence. A vague regret survived, however.

I mechanically repeated to myself from time to time: "My brother has been killed, my brother has been killed . . ." But these words conveyed hardly anything to my mind, my grief seemed to be numbed. I confusedly flattered myself that just now, at the first respite, it would awake, awful and sweet, and envelop me in its generous flood.

Another obsession, this one very ordinary and almost humiliating, was the rubbed place on my heel. It was not cured and I had struggled in vain to break the counter. The same rub at each step. On the uneven, stony surface of the bad roads we were following, I often made a false step. So great was my exhaustion that I no longer even took the trouble to throw my weight on to the tip of my foot in order to lessen the painful contact.

A high road at last. In a neighbouring field we caught sight of some teams and forage and ammunition waggons.

"An artillery park," Henriot shouted across Bouillon's head.

A little farther on we passed a troop of cavalry wrapped in their long dark blue great-coats. Our *poilus* expressed their envy of them aloud.

"War's a picnic to those chaps!"

It was still quite dark—we were going through a forest when the cannonade started again, abrupt and violent. So near this time. Everyone started at it.

It rumbled and roared on every side. It felt exactly like being in the middle of a battle. And what a striking contrast there was between the silence, the sweet-scented air, and the calm of the woods, and this crashing and thundering! We were alone on this road, the moon had just risen; a gentle breeze caressed the little flowers on the slope, and the moss damp with dew.

Day was breaking when we left the wood.

We advanced across a slightly sloping upland.

"Halt!"

Rows and rows of piled arms stretched away into the distance. There was a brigade, or perhaps a division there. We counted on a rest worth having. But a whirring noise was heard. We looked up. One, no two German aeroplanes, like the silhouettes of evil-looking birds, were easily recognisable.

A neighbouring company fired a volley at them. They continued to flutter above us turning and twisting insolently. The men shook their fists at them. And the same thought occurred to us all: What were our aeroplanes doing? A third Taube arrived and dropped a rocket.

"The devil!"

"Look out!" shouted Henriot. "We've been marked right enough! We shall catch it hot!"

The alarm was given. We scattered at the double and threw ourselves down, and shivered in the icy dawn. The expected shells did not come. The captain sent for the subaltern.

"To give him a wiggling," said Descroix.

Playoust jeered.

"He talked of catching it hot! I see he was quite right about it!"

On the Way to the Firing Line 189

The warning had sufficed. The big detachment collected there, seemed to have evaporated. Some platoons were disappearing ahead over the neighbouring ridge.

Were we to follow? Not at all. We were taken back, on the contrary, as far as the wood. We all went into it, and the order was given to pile arms. We might rest, but were not to go far away!

CHAPTER VII

I EXAMINE MY CONSCIENCE

I WENT to lie down a little way off, at the foot of a tree. At last I had a free moment. At last I belonged to myself!

The funereal refrain resounded in me anew: Victor killed! I expected . . . Dead, dead, my brother! A procession of regrets was bound to follow! In spite of myself, paltry worries came back to annoy me, my sore foot as usual. I lost my temper. Despicable solicitude! When I had been so hard hit!

Revolving these thoughts in my mind, I was suddenly seized with terror, with that terror which always freezes me at the sudden disappearance of any being with whom I have come into contact. But for all this terror I must confess that I was only moderately afflicted, however reluctant I might be to admit it.

It went no doubt to prove that I was incapable of moral suffering. It filled me with shame. I longed ardently to overcome it. But in what way? Who could believe that I went as far as to ask myself, "What happens when one loses an only brother; how does one feel?"

And then all at once I lost patience. Come along! Come along! Let's be frank. Had I not sworn long ago to avoid all juggling with words. No

shammed grief for me! Quite true I had lost my brother! But what was he to me? I remember the impression, corroborated so often, that we had nothing in common. He, the classical type of soldier, a slave to his convictions. I, reared on philosophy, moulded of doubt and detachment. A brother to whom I had never for a moment opened my heart, with whom I had had no intimate converse. How pitifully trite, too, our correspondence had been! He for his part lived engrossed in the wife chosen and schooled to his liking, and in his children, who interested me only as being pretty little creatures. My brother simply by an accident of birth! I obviously could not mourn for him in the same way as for someone I had loved!

This reasoning calmed me. But the question still persisted mechanically: "Then whom did I love?" Suddenly the answer, the cruel answer, presented itself: "No one on earth! I was quite alone!"

Why was the thought of my heart withered beyond all help, so odious to me to-day? Why, in order to dispel it, was I driven to conjure up the sorrow which years and years ago had made my child's heart bleed?

My mother. My sweet mother. Fourteen years had passed in vain, since that terrible day; the wound had never healed. She had been ill no time; a bad attack of influenza, a great deal of fever, threatened pneumonia. I had spent part of the afternoon in her room. She complained of nothing but thirst. I got her what she wanted and reminded her when it was time to take her medicine. She was not very much pulled down. I remember that she had congratulated me on obtaining a good place in Latin prose. Some

artless remark on the maid's part had tickled us both. . . . And that night the hospital nurse who had arrived a few hours before, knocked at my door, panic-stricken. . . . It was all over. What a thunderbolt it had been.

I felt my heart swell and my eyes fill again at the memory of it! I still mourned for her to-day, for her, for her! So I was not quite lacking in all humane feeling. And it was not my fault if the present stroke of destiny failed to move me at all deeply.

I felt softened, however. The dear shade exhaled some tender property. I had been my mother's confidant as a child. It was to me that she liked to unbosom herself, morning and evening, as she bent her harmonious face over my face. She used to say to me: "We two understand each other, don't we?"

Had she not once or twice gently and seriously confided in me the secret of certain fears. Supposing anything were to happen to her, she seemed to fear for the future union of the family. She felt that she was the bond between us, that as long as she was alive, she concentrated our affections. My father, without entirely fathoming her, adored her, and so did my brother, though brought up away from her at school. If she were the first to go. . . . It was an odd presentiment.

So my mother had foreseen this estrangement between beings of the same blood; had grieved about it beforehand. Alas! she could never have believed that the breach could have yawned so large. . . . If she could have suspected that a day would come when her Michel would hear of the other's death with dry

eyes and an untouched heart, what bitterness it would have been to her! The thought weighed on my mind.

I got up and walked a few steps. I was limping slightly.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Ever since it had been light, the deafening uproar had redoubled.

Frémont who was lying on his side gave me a friendly wave.

"What are you doing there?"

"Writing my diary."

He waved a bundle of closely written sheets.

"My wife can't grumble! I sent her the same amount yesterday."

"Are you telling her that we can hear firing?"

"Rather not! I'm giving her a description of our humdrum existence at Orne."

"Will you lend me your stylo, when you've finished?" I asked.

"Half a minute! I'm just ending it off."

He got up.

"I recommend you to try my desk; this big stone. Most handy! Got some writing paper?"

"Yes, thanks."

I settled down. The idea of writing had been put into my head by the sight of Frémont. By doing so it seemed to me that I might atone for or lessen my lack of . . .

I sent my condolences first of all to my father, to whom Victor was everything; his sole object in existence. Fragments of a recent conversation floated across my mind. In what a voice he had said: "They will nearly all stay there!" The old Spartan! But had he not counted too much on his strength of mind.

. . . And yet, no. I was certain of his unshakable constancy. I foresaw that in case of victory, the old man would not utter a complaint, but would congratulate himself on having contributed to it by his loss.

Oh, come along. It had got to be done. . . . Luckily I need not write much. The noise of the cannonade was a good excuse for brevity. A few sentences would be enough, a suitable expression of my compassion. I signed it. Then I wrote a line to my sister-in-law. That of course was obligatory. Poor little woman! A widow, at twenty-four, with two kids. . . . The idea of her loneliness and misery saddened me. My pen raced over the paper. I was soon at the end of a sheet.

I fastened up these letters with a sigh of relief at having done my duty. But it suddenly struck me that I could not send them. They would run the risk of getting there before the official intimation. I shuddered at the idea.

Then why should I have been in such a hurry?

Meanwhile I felt about in my pocket, and pulled out a third card. Did I realise at once where my steps were taking me. I think not. I had only written the heading. . . . And yet! I was smiling; but I was strangely troubled.

A line to announce this loss which clouded my campaign, a pitying allusion to the misery of the survivor. What should I add? I was not dissatisfied with the manly words in which I describe us as sending a friendly greeting to a few beings in the world, just as we were about to hurl ourselves into the ghastly furnace.

I re-read them with a smile, half-tender, half-scepti-

I Examine My Conscience 195

cal, and slowly and rather dreamily, I addressed the envelope.

Mademoiselle Jeannine Landry
rue Faidherbe.

St-Mandé.

When should I be able to despatch this letter?
Perhaps I should fall with it on my breast. . . .
And people would think I had been writing to my
fiancée!

CHAPTER VIII

AWAITING OUR CUE

I HAD got up again. The inflamed place on my heel was becoming intolerable. I resigned myself to taking off my shoes and stockings.

The head which had formed yesterday had been pulled off. It had a very unhealthy look. An abscess would probably form.

What could I do? Report sick? For a sore on my foot! And just now too. But my claim would not be allowed. Bouchut would not look at me! I had seen poor wretches at the manoeuvres forced to march with gory feet, and with septic gatherings from which blood oozed at the pressure. . . . No, there was no hope for me there! I must go on then, but in future should have to endure fresh torture at each step I took.

Guillaumin had joined me.

"Your foot again? Let's have a look!"

He bent down and examined it.

The counter! Oh! be blowed to it! That is a bore! Why go out of your way to get something different from the regulation boots. I'm delighted with mine. Still it can't be helped. Something must be done for this."

I explained that I had treated myself with tincture of iodine.

"Diluted, I hope?"

"How do you mean?"

I learnt from him that the strength supplied now was too caustic.

"Some picric acid is what you want on there now."

"You haven't got any, I suppose?"

"What are you thinking of? I've got a little bit of everything!"

He went off and soon came back, with a small bottle and a brush which he carefully took out of a glass tube.

"Stings a bit, doesn't it?"

He had also brought a bit of linen. He deftly bound up my ankle. I admired his dexterity.

"Where did you learn it?"

"Hunting, of course! That's the way to get sprains."

He added:

"I think that'll do until to-morrow!"

He got hold of my boot.

"This filthy counter. That's what's the matter. If only there was a way . . ."

"Of doing what?"

"With some scissors . . . I've got some of them too, in my housewife."

Another journey. When he had got back and adjusted his eye-glass he set to work to snip and shape. Particles of leather kept falling.

"You're not spoiling it?"

"Don't you worry! I'm an adept at this sort of thing!"

He had finished.

"Shove it on again. Well, how does it feel?"

The friction was actually much lessened.

"It will be the salvation of me, old chap!"

He made a good-natured grimace. I looked at his thick red nose, his sandy moustache with its piteous droop at the corners of his mouth, his oily hair tangled under the cap which was perched on the back of his head. There was a touch of the grotesque in his ugliness at this moment. A blundering simple soul too, and overtalkative. And yet . . . what a good sort he was! He had that rarest of virtues, Kindness, the mark of real distinction of soul. What spontaneous gratitude he aroused in me. To think that quite lately I had hardly dared to defend him against Laquarrière's sarcasms. That would all be changed now. To-day my choice was made, and well made.

There seemed to be a lull in the fighting. The cannonade was less violent. I wished for a moment that the struggle might end without us. . . . Yes, but only on condition that the result was favourable. I was not without apprehensions on that score, for what a repulse that action, described to us the day before, must have been!

Guillaumin was hungry, and did not worry his head about anything else. Now or never was the time to stoke up. Before joining in the dance!

I took his advice. Before starting in the middle of the night, we had been given a cold meal, potatoes, bully beef, and cheese. We had some bread left. Having clubbed our provisions we ate our little feast on the moss.

"Like Robinson Crusoe, what!"

I made a point of getting my companion to take the largest helps.

When the last mouthful was swallowed, he lay down and shut his eyes.

"What do you say to a little snooze?"

I tried to imitate him, but could not get to sleep. A road ran through the wood, about a hundred yards away. Endless vehicles passed along it in an incessant string. My foot was not hurting me now. Why shouldn't I push on as far as that?

As I skirted our piles of arms I noticed an open haversack sprawling on its back apart from the others. Some undergarments were hanging out, and a squad book, and one or two other oddments were lying in the grass a little farther on.

I turned the offending object over with my foot and spelt the inscription traced on the square of grey canvas. Then I shouted:

"Judsi!"

He was seated with several others about twenty yards off.

"Judsi!" I repeated.

His neighbour, Lamalou, nudged him.

"Don't you hear the sergeant talking to you?"

"Wot's wrong?" he said without moving.

"Does this haversack belong to you?"

"Wot 'aversack? Yes, it might."

"What the deuce is it doing here?"

"Anything wrong with it?"

Judsi impertinently fixed his sly clown's eyes on me.

"You know the captain will not have untidiness or disorder. Why is your haversack open?"

The blackguard pretended to consider the matter.

"Probably . . . 'cos it ain't shut!"

This reply overjoyed his audience. Loriot slapped his thigh. Lamalou nearly died with laughing. As for me, my cheeks burned. I went down on one knee, and pulled the iron rations out of the haversack with a

jerk. Then I counted the biscuits. Ten instead of fourteen! Four were missing.

I went straight up to the man.

"Judsi, what have you done with your biscuits?"

"My biscuits?"

He tossed his head with a monkey-like grimace.

"No 'posse' either, p'r'aps!"

"Answer me. Four are missing already!"

"Ow dear, now, wot a business!"

There was dead silence round us. They knew that matters were coming to a head.

"You know that we are strictly forbidden to touch the biscuits without orders . . ." I reminded him dryly.

"Oo's orders? The ministers'?"

Judsi looked round in search of applause. He did not get it. Lorient alone sniggered in a foolish sort of way. Lamalou cut him short.

"It's true enough that we have no right."

I emphasised his words.

"Lamalou knows well enough: he's seen some fighting and knows what it is!"

The ex-private in the African battalion again agreed. I continued:

"You understand that I, personally, don't care a hang. But a time might come when we were in a jolly tight hole and should be thankful to have our biscuits. And then it's not for us to argue about it. If it's forbidden, it's forbidden, and Sergeant Guillaumin and I are responsible. . . ."

The argument carried weight. Somebody said:

"Not worth getting slanged about!"

Bouillon outdid him.

"Strikes me it ain't the sergeants wot worries you."

"You're right there!"

They were agreed on that point.

"Well, Judsi?" I began again less severely.

He tried to get out of it.

"W'en a bloke's starvin'!"

"Starving! You've had your haversack rations."

Bouillon gave him away.

"'E didn't take 'em. Couldn't bovver wif carryin' 'em!"

Judsi dropped some of his swagger. He got up sulkily, and slowly pulled one, two, three biscuits out of his greatcoat pocket . . .

"And the fourth?"

"Oh! . . . eaten!"

"Well anyhow, put those back."

He obeyed with very sour looks; then raising his clown's face, he said:

"'Ave to put up with a empty stummick all day then?"

"I don't want to get you into trouble," I said; "I shall not report you. But let this be understood in future. . . . The biscuits are sacred, see! Now . . ."

I looked round the circle.

"If your pals like to give up a little of their ration, that's their affair. Another time they'll find some way of making you carry your own. . . ."

This Solomon's judgment perplexed the audience. Bouillon saved the situation by sticking a knife into a potato:

"'Ere you are, Judsi. 'Ere's a pertater. It's one o' yours by rights. I picked 'em up!"

Gaudéreaux split a piece of cheese. "Rooty?" Lamalou supplied some.

"Take that you old blighter. But another time

you better mind or I'll catch you such a biff in the bottom . . . just like the sergeant said."

I went away in a state of naive contentment, thinking that I had not done badly. For the first time I had a glimmering of the meaning of the word Authority. To know how to command men!

I saw Lieutenant Henriot coming towards me from the edge of the wood in a state of wild excitement. He had his field-glasses in his hand.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" he cried. "What on earth are we waiting for? I ask you!"

I suggested.

"Well, but . . . They seem to be holding us in reserve."

"That's all very well for an hour! But ever since this morning! What the devil is the use of us? Doesn't everything point to the fact that we ought to go to the rescue instead of crossing our arms? No orders . . . No orders? And suppose the bearer of them has been killed or taken prisoner! There's only one rule that counts: the same that won all their victories for the Prussians in 1870. That is to keep on till you get to the guns. They're near enough, in all conscience. Never heard such a din."

He continued:

"And the moment was so well chosen! Look at all those chaps, how they are aching to get to work!"

I looked at him instead. Was he dreaming? The men were lying about in a circle after their meal. They certainly seemed resigned to their lot, but as for enthusiasm—not a sign of it. Nor even of that altogether physical excitement of which people speak. Henriot obviously attributed his own keenness to them.

He was most certainly in a state of exaltation. Was he to be envied? Probably. But my familiar spirit of analysis did not desert me. It was useless to pretend that the approach of a battle absolutely changes men's characters, that no one can say beforehand what he will do under certain circumstances. Nonsense. I was quite convinced that I should never be roused to acts of heroism and folly. All the better for that matter. The primordial quality of self-possession was the greatest safeguard for myself and for others. Poor Henriot. What childishness it was to be so set upon hurling himself into the fray. What difference would our presence make? Weren't we far better off resting in the shade screened from the glare of the midday sun? . . .

Descroix came and started Henriot off again. Frémont called me:

"Halloa! I was looking for you! If you want to send your letters, Dagomert is there on the road."

He was the brigade motor-cyclist.

"I'll go with you," I said.

Dagomert, a tall, pale fellow, with a comical expression, good-humouredly undertook our commission.

"Hand 'em over. I've got piles more already. I hope to have the luck to come across a post-office. They keep me on the run all right. I've just come from Censenvoye. It's a business getting along the road with all these troops, too!"

I asked him if he knew anything about the battle. How were things going?

He exclaimed:

"We've just given them a fine doing?"

"Seriously?"

A thrill ran through me. But I mistrusted these tales.

"We saw some wounded belonging to the 130th yesterday. . . . They didn't think it much fun!" I objected.

"I can understand that! Their regiment was wiped out!"

"Well, then?"

"That was just at the beginning! It was up to the Bosches to advance. We let them cross the river. . . . Heavens! How they swarmed! Then all at once the 75's began to talk! . . . Their bridges were smashed up at once. And the arms and legs and heads that were flying about! . . . It appears to have been highly entertaining!"

"And now?"

"We're pursuing them. Bringing up reinforcements, and masses of artillery!"

He added:

"But we've been badly cut up!"

"In ours?"

"If you saw the ambulance, just over there!"

Frémont interrupted:

"Halloa! That our lot starting?"

"Yes, there was something doing down there."

"*Au revoir*, Dagomert, old chap!"

We hurried along. The men had got their packs on, and were assembling without any more signs of emotion than when starting for an ordinary route march. The lieutenant's excitement was in striking contrast with the phlegmatic appearance of the rest. He was fussing and running up and down.

"Entrenching tools . . . Entrenching tools in your belts! Cartridges where you can get at them!"

"Don't you worry!" murmured Lamalou testing the mechanism of his rifle.

Henriot came up at once.

"Made up their minds at last. Not a bit too early either."

He had a wild look in his eye. It pleased me to excite him still more:

"Things are not going badly you know!"

"What! What! Have you heard something?"

I repeated the information the motor-cyclist had given us. He hurriedly consulted his map.

"On the bank, you say? We're pursuing them? Oh, but that means a great victory!"

The captain blew his whistle. We formed into a semicircle.

"My friends . . ." he began.

Armed with a piece of straw, Humel was tickling his neighbour's neck. This childishness shocked me.

The captain said only a few words. He was nothing of an orator. I was afraid for a moment that his speech might end in gibbering. He recovered himself and concluded. And the men seemed moved by it. It didn't take much to do the trick!

The company formed up again, by platoons, in columns of four. I considered my companions, one by one, with passionate curiosity.

Bouillon was licking his lips, topping that last bit of cheese! Judsi had got hold of Siméon, and was ragging him, telling him that big louts like him would be the first to be knocked out. Siméon was genuinely amused by the idea. Lamalou was calmly blackening Icard's, the miller's, sight. They might all have been a hundred miles away from the battle-field where more than one of them would fall!

And Guillaumin? I asked him how he felt.

"Pretty fit, thanks. I've had a good nap!"

It did not seem to occur to him that I might be solicitous about his morale.

They were all heroes then. My goodness no! Simply happy-go-lucky! There was a slight distinction though, and whatever it was, they scored by a propitious frame of mind. I was afraid that I might show up badly, being the only one to remain clear-headed. What could be done about it? I forced a wry smile.

Then I saw that Corporal Donnadiou was looking very unhappy and depressed. His nostrils looked pinched, and he was gazing at the ground. . . . He was obviously not keen to fight. I felt sorry for him. He was no doubt thinking of his wife, of his two children, one of them on the way. . . .

I caught sight of Frémont, standing stock-still in the rear of the first platoon. I knew what he was dreaming of too. I repented at the thought that I might have impaired his courage yesterday. A persistent shadow seemed to have clouded his face ever since . . . I only hoped that he too might get through.

CHAPTER IX

THE BAPTISM OF FIRE

ONCE having left the wood, we reached the little hilltop of which I have already spoken.

In spite of having been told that the modern battle-field is empty, I had never imagined anything so desertlike as this. Not a man to be seen in these fields which sloped gently downwards; it was abandoned territory.

The firing still continued to rage around us. We could even distinguish a distant crackling now, either rifle-firing or shrapnel, a sign that we were getting nearer.

When we passed by a Calvary, I saw some of the men sign themselves, Gaudéreaux and Trichet among others. They would never have done it during manœuvres. Why was I inclined to see in this Calvary one of the points which would decide the fate of the struggle? I think I must have been hypnotised by the remembrance of the one at Isly. I recollected Zola's superb pages in *La Débâcle*. Another passage which recurred to my mind was the description of Waterloo in *La Chartreuse* for which I had had a great admiration ever since my schooldays. I was tempted to compare myself with Fabrice. How far removed I was from his freshness of spirit, his youthful enthusiasm.

Guillaumin suddenly signed to me.

"Just look at that!"

Down below us, yonder, there rose a puff of smoke, then another nearer; a third; all in a line. They might have been little bonfires lit by an invisible hand. The bursting points of shells!

The noise of the short sharp reports reached us.

"Look out," Guillaumin whispered to me. "They're lengthening their range!"

We had stopped, silent and nonplussed. The captain galloped along the line.

"To fifty paces—extend."

Henriot bellowed, repeating the order. There was no panic. I think no one had fully realised yet that those slight puffs which had appeared were a direct menace to us.

We had taken up the extended order and went on marching, but with rather broken ranks.

"Close up! Close up!" shouted Henriot.

He was running. I noticed that he had drawn his sword. It was very funny. Did he think that he was about to charge? He tried to put it back into the sheath. He stumbled. The men nudged each other with their elbows. A pint of good blood!

Our "connecting file" rushed up.

"Blob formation!"

Henriot, who was still struggling with his scabbard, hesitated. Then he shouted:

"Left incline! No. Right incline! No. As you were!"

"He's all at sea!" said Guillaumin.

Suddenly . . . What was happening? Something whistled past.

"Lie down!"

I threw myself down, and the men too, without waiting for the order. One did it instinctively.

“Testudos! Testudos!” bellowed Henriot, in an extraordinarily shrill voice.

There was a gigantic explosion close at hand; the ground shook. We were lying *pêle-mêle*, wherever we'd happened to fall, in groups of eight or ten, and covering much too much ground.

“Close! Close!” I shouted. “Glue yourselves on to each other.”

But the ground was shaken again, some flints were sent flying against us. No one stirred. What an instant that was. I hardly dared to look round. As far as the eye could see our men were scattered over the ground in little driblets in the same way in which water spilt on a pavement trickles into tiny pools.

I had predicted that I would be clear-headed.

Shells poured from the radiant sky, preceded by their awe-inspiring blast. We realised which were meant for us, and would fall within a radius of two or three hundred yards. If a single one hit the mark nothing would be left of us but a bleeding mass. O God of Chance! I humbly placed myself in His hands. Second after second passed in the expectation of annihilation. Then I recovered a certain amount of detachment in the thought that I had lost all control over my fate. My thoughts were in a whirl. Life was a fine thing. I might have employed the time allotted to me very differently. My youth contained nothing. I detested Laquarrière. I had made a mess of my share of existence! And mixed with these regrets was a new hope hard to explain.

How many minutes had passed. There was a lull. A voice was raised; it was Bouillon's.

"Nobody killed!"

The relief of it! We raised ourselves up on to our knees. Some aeroplanes were circling above us. Taubes, of course!

"Up you get!"

The neighbouring section had started off again. We advanced rapidly. Our connecting file came towards us at the double.

"By sections!"

Henriot repeated:

"Dreher, Guillaumin, by sections!"

We looked at each other, then I exclaimed:

"Come along, the 2nd with me!"

The men did not seem to understand.

"Bouguet, Donnadiou."

Guillaumin had gone off to rally his thirty *poilus*.

Mine at last made up their minds to follow me, in some disorder.

What formation ought we to adopt? Two deep? Columns of four? Consult Henriot? I hailed him. Waste of energy. He went off making incomprehensible signals to Guillaumin. We must make the best of it.

"Two deep! Two deep!"

The booming began again . . . for us, this lot!

"Kneel!"

I shook Siméon by the shoulder!

"Close! Testudos!"

A few actually remembered what to do—Lamalou and Bouillon. They stuck their heads between the legs of the men kneeling in front of them. Their neighbours imitated them.

I had been the last to get down, at the head of my small column. There was no one for me to

shelter behind, so I ran a greater risk than any of the others.

"Get back here, Sergeant," said Corporal Bouguet, "we'll make room for you!"

I crawled back, and slipped in between him and Trichet.

"Thanks!"

I was guilty of a little bit of bluff and stuck my head out. There was a regular hurricane going on. All round us there were great spurts of smoke and dust, and clods of earth were hurled against us. But the pack seemed a great protection, and I felt that we were not very vulnerable really. Some shells did not burst, and I made a remark to that effect.

I had to watch the movements of the neighbouring sections in order to conform to them.

They were going on again.

"Advance!"

We went on.

"Pretty hot stuff!" said Judsi. "We ought to go in zigzags, best way to get through," he advised.

I approved.

Judsi's right. The range only varies in depth.

We were beginning to distinguish the sound of the different shells through this infernal din. The big ones were always impressive; we frankly snapped our fingers at the smaller ones.

"Is that all?" said Bouguet as a splinter of shrapnel bounced off his pack.

"Listen!" Lamalou exclaimed, "there are the 75's letting loose."

I don't know what we expected. A miracle—the immediate cessation of the enemy's fire. We were

disillusioned. It redoubled in intensity. One or two shells again fell near by.

"Ah!" exclaimed Bouguet. "That got 'em!"

"Who?"

"The lads of No. 1! Fell slap in the middle of 'em."

A shiver ran down my back. I only hoped to goodness that Frémont was all right. Looking round I saw haggard faces turned towards us. Corporal Donna-dieu was deadly white. I forced a smile and shouted:

"Halloa there! How are you getting along?"

"So, so," said Lamalou.

I nearly tripped over a black, cylinder-shaped mass.

"Look out there. A 'dud'!"

They avoided it and Bouillon said:

"Lucky you gave tongue like that. I was just going to tip it a hefty biff."

How long did that march under artillery fire last? We covered a good bit of ground, two or three broad undulations. We halted, and reformed and advanced. From time to time we came across an enormous hole, five or six feet across and three feet deep, which we had to go round.

"Pretty useful, their 'coal boxes,' to make such pits."

Happily, Judsi, cried:

"They're digging a grave for the Kaiser!"

My one idea was to keep my intervals.

Bouillon asked me whether a river we were coming to was the Meuse.

I made him repeat it. A river? Why so there was . . . The Othain perhaps? For everyone was talking about it. . . .

"How are we to get across. Swim?"

I was asking myself the same question. The bursts of firing grew less frequent. We advanced in rushes, for longer distances, but not so fast. We felt comparatively safe. Our attention was beginning to wander. . . .

"Lie down! We're in for it now!"

There was a terrible explosion close by, on our left . . . a flash, and a stinging blast. I saw Bouguet put his hand up to his cap; a bit of the peak had gone.

Looking up, I shouted:

"Anything the matter?"

"Yes!"

The squall was not over. Never mind that! I ran along. A man was writhing on the ground.

"It's Blanchet," said Judsi.

"Where's he hit?"

"In the bread-basket."

The poor fellow was lying doubled up on his side. He was holding back his guts with his two hands stuck through a hole in his greatcoat. At a movement he made to push his gun aside, I caught sight of them. . . . I was petrified with horror, just as I had been one evening when I had seen a child pulled from under a tram. But I realised that everyone's gaze was fixed on me. I said:

"Donnadieu, he's in your half-section, isn't he?"

The corporal did not answer. His face was mottled, and there were beads of perspiration on his forehead.

"You must . . . take away his ammunition!" I continued.

He hesitated, then bent down with terrible repugnance, and touched the wounded man's cartridge-pouches. He had some difficulty in opening them, because his hands were trembling.

Blanchet was giving in, his eyes were growing dim, and yet he had the courage to move a little to enable us to undo his haversack, which was also emptied. I repeated:

"Come along! Come along. Hurry up!"

Donnadieu murmured:

"I say, Sergeant, surely you won't leave him like that?"

I read in his eyes the vague hope of staying behind, of slinking away. . . .

"Come along! We must catch the others up!" I said impatiently.

Then less harshly:

"The stretcher party will come and pick him up; they are sure not to be far off."

I bent down over the wounded man:

"Do you hear, old chap?"

He gave me a poignant look, without uttering a word. I stammered:

"You'll be all right, you'll find! *Au revoir!*"

Then raising myself I added more firmly:

"And now we must get on!"

The men followed me, but there were some very painful moments to be got through.

"The father of a family!" signed Siméon who knew him.

Our column was lengthening. I waited for the stragglers.

"Come along! Donnadieu, Trichet! . . ."

The ground sloped down towards the river. We were surprised by a strange, fetid smell in the air, which was oddly out of keeping with this harmonious countryside, gilded by the summer. We tried to make out what it was.

"Corpses!"

"And not French ones either!"

It was a fact that these grey forms lying in the grass were Germans—a regular hecatomb. Rows upon rows of dead bodies, which, in some places, we had to step over. . . . When had they fallen there? A day or two before no doubt. The men drew each other's attention to some ravens wheeling overhead or perched near by, croaking.

Pouah!

I thought of nothing but how to keep my nose covered. The men were less horrified, and seemed on the contrary interested, some of them almost amused. They were brutes, at heart, with no respect for anything!

Lamalou made a vile remark, revived from Sylla:

"It's Bosche. It smells good!"

CHAPTER X

A MOMENT'S RESPITE

WE reached the river which I afterwards discovered was the Loison. There was no difficulty there. Some foot-bridges had been erected, which bent beneath our weight till they touched the water.

On the other bank we were greeted by some Engineers.

"We've been working the water-wheel for you foot-sloggers! Isn't that worth a drink?"

We replied:

"In Berlin!"

The torrent of shells still continued, but passed over our heads. Our field-guns retorted, but only feebly, as we were well aware.

We began to clamber up the other side of the valley. More corpses! On our right we could see the smoking ruins of a village. But our morale had much improved, for we had just crossed the water-bed where the enemy's efforts had spent themselves in vain for three whole days.

Pffmm . . . ! Pffmm . . . ! We looked up.

"Pills?"

Bullets. Yes! An unpleasant sensation.

In the fields on a line with us, we caught sight of isolated soldiers (rotters—the lost lot), lying down

or cowering on the ground, others dragging themselves along on their knees, or limping along. Where the deuce was the enemy? Perhaps at the edge of that wood about twelve hundred yards away, but invisible, needless to say.

A bank skirted a cross-road running along the side of the hill. We went towards it. Cover! Everyone felt the need of a real halt. The wish was fulfilled. We formed into sections.

Guillaumin greeted me with:

"Any of you hit? I was very much afraid so, for a minute!"

"A man named Blanchet," I said; "a splinter in the stomach!"

"Poor devil! Two kids, I believe!"

"And what about your lot?"

"Nobody. Not like the first. A shell made an awful mess of them."

"Frémont?"

"He wasn't touched, luckily."

Breton, the quartermaster-sergeant, joined us.

"Halloa, you chaps, going strong?"

We answered cordially:

"Not so bad for a start."

"We've done jolly well!" he said with naïve delight.

The captain came up accompanied by two sub-alterns. Some of the men began to get up.

"Stay as you are. It's not worth getting you fired at!"

"And what about you, sir!" Lamalou remarked.

"Oh, I'm taboo!"

The other gazed at him. The captain repeated:

"They can't do me any harm today!"

He smiled, his moustache bristling slyly. Then, turning to one of his companions:

"Pleased with your N. C. O.'s, Henriot?"

"Very much pleased, sir! Dreher and Guillaumin especially have done remarkably well! . . ."

"I was sure of it."

They went off. Guillaumin whispered:

"All over us, isn't he?"

He was joking, but I felt that he was touched and proud, dear chap that he was.

This rest did us both harm and good. Good, because we recovered from our exhaustion. We had a drink and a bite. Harm, because we softened and no one wanted to go on again.

An intermittent firing went on. Pffmm . . .! A bullet! . . . another! . . . and another! . . . Judsi pretended to catch them.

We heard that a man had just been killed in Raveli's platoon, a bullet through his head. Confound it! We bent down. It was oppressively hot.

Then the artillery started off again. The order was passed along to lie down and protect our heads with our packs. The cartridge-pouches caused us agony. We stayed like that for nearly three-quarters of an hour. The men grew restless, and would rather have done a bolt, even forwards. I was the only one, I believe, to prefer the fatigue and less risk.

Henriot came to warn us to be ready.

We were. Some of the men readjusted their belts and straps.

A company on our right, the 23rd, was starting. Bouguet, who was watching it, exclaimed:

"Lawks. They're going down like ninepins!"

Guillaumin gave me a short lecture. All the theories they had taught us at the "Peloton" were out of date, all the supposed lessons of the Russo-Japanese war! The movements now must be carried out in established formations, sections for preference. The advantage of it was that the men felt they had support. Yes, but what a target they offered for the machine-guns in ambush.

Whom should I see appearing at my side but De Valpic, who crawled up.

"I wanted to come and wish you good luck," he said simply.

"Very nice of you!"

Lifting up my water-bottle, I said:

"Have a drink?"

"No thanks, Frémont gave me some water."

I was surprised. I had thought that that was the errand he had come on. But I was mistaken. He went away again. It was a purely friendly proceeding.

The order to start was delayed. Even I began to get impatient. Guillaumin, who had gone off, reappeared and confided in me that there had been great excitement.

The captain had just discovered Descroix tearing off his stripes.

"What an idea!"

"On the pretext that N. C. O.'s are marked particularly."

"Well?"

It turned out badly. The captain called him . . . a coward. He defended himself and contended that there was no need for him to get himself killed for nothing!

"No one is ever killed for nothing!" the other answered. "And as to your stripes, if you daren't wear them, I'll relieve you of them!"

"The captain's a fool!" I said.

"Do you think so?"

"Certainly! It's probably true that the Bosches mark the N. C. O.'s."

Goodness knows I held no brief for Descroix, but Guillaumin disgusted me then with his little heroic sniffs. .

I had decided to use my pack as a shield. I told him.

"Pooh! Do you think that's any good?"

I implored him to follow my example. It was sufficient protection against grape-shot. He ended by allowing himself to be convinced, and gave the same advice to the men who for the most part did not follow it.

Henriot, on his knees, was watching for the signal and giving us endless pieces of advice in an undertone.

"You'll all start at once. Keep your eyes fixed on me, see? At the double. Is that clear? And as for firing, be careful about that. Be sure to wait for the order to fire!"

"Talk away," muttered Lamalou; "think we're going to wait for your bally permission when we get a sight of the Bosches?"

The whistle was blown.

"Advance!" shouted the subaltern.

CHAPTER XI

A MUCH STIFFER MATTER

WE had hardly taken fifteen steps when the whistle began in our ears again! We threw ourselves down. But not quickly enough! Our left hesitated . . . and got mixed.

"Scatter! Can't you? You . . ." I shouted.

A man spun round and fell.

Henriot bellowed:

"Can't you lie down?"

But his voice hardly reached us.

"Why doesn't he lie down himself?" said Judsi.

"Wot's the sense in it?"

He added:

"Pore Siméon. See wot a bloomin' pirouette 'e made. Didn't I say 'e was too tall!"

The firing slackened off, but we naturally saw nothing. A new rush—too long that one! Pffmm . . . Crack! We were enveloped in a noise like the snapping of straps. A man fell not far from me, and the fellow next him looked as if he were going to stop.

"No, no! There isn't time," I shouted.

"Run! Run!" shouted Henriot.

It was easily said!

We had just gone into a ploughed field, and the earth stuck to our shoes.

"Will you run?" repeated the subaltern in a feverish tone.

I began to trot ponderously, steadying my water-bottle and my haversack. Two or three of the men did the same, but at the end of twenty yards we gave it up, out of breath. . . .

I turned round and saw one of my chaps fall. I ran up.

"Well, Lorient, what's up now?"

"Oh, the blighters!" he groaned. "Oh, the bloody bastards!"

"What's the matter?"

His hands were glued to his front. He shrieked.

"Ow! my rupture!"

It was put on. I was not going to be caught!

"Get up!"

"Not much!"

I shook him.

"Up you get, Lorient!"

While he was going into contortions the others were gaining ground. Infuriated I yelled in his ear:

"You could be shot for this!"

But I suddenly felt doubtful. Was he really shamming? Tears were oozing out of his eyes.

"It's because I ran," he groaned.

The rest was lost. . . . He abruptly unbuckled his belt, and his braces. I bent down; there was a lump as big as my fist. . . . He hiccupped, and vomited.

Stupefied and sickened, I stammered:

"Yes, yes. . . . Then . . . St-tay where you are!"

All I had to do was to catch up with the rest. But now a new storm of bullets began to whizz by—thicker

than ever—buzzing like a swarm of bees. . . . And, Pap! Pap! Parapap! Pap! . . . There surely must have been a mitrailleuse in action.

I was alone. I no longer had the support of friendly presences. I did not take more than thirty yards. Good God! I suddenly collapsed. I hurled myself on to the ground.

My temples were throbbing. I could not get my breath. What did my life hang on? A thread! Pffff! Pffmm. . . . If one of these sinister flies touched me . . . there would be nothing left. The horror of such near annihilation . . . suffocated me. Nothing! . . . The black chasm . . . I did not want to . . .

With my mouth open I convulsively breathed the air. I soaked myself in the supreme sweetness of things . . . the dazzling sun, the transparent sky, the green fields spread in my sight, and the blue curtain of the woods, encircling the clear horizon . . .!

Pffmm! Less than two yards from my face a little dust arose, a clod had been hit by a bullet. I buried my head in the furrow. I dreamt of digging a hole, and burying myself in it, alive!

My section was almost disappearing yonder, nearly two hundred yards away. . . . I suddenly regained consciousness. What was I doing? I was a coward then?

A coward? The word hurt me! Stay here behind. Oh, if only I had a wound! How I longed for one, no matter how bad a one as long as it was not mortal! . . . Or a sprain. I twisted my ankle and—must I confess it—pressed on it with all my strength.

There was nothing to be done! The ligaments

held. As a matter of fact I soon gave it up, realising that I must go on. It had got to be done!

I was just about to overtake my section when there was a new unexpected noise . . . like a huge piece of calico being torn. . . . They were opening fire farther down the line. But upon what? Nobody knew, but it was the signal for everyone to let fly. Instantly there was a crackle from one end of our line to the other.

When I came up some of the men turned round to look at me.

"Here's the sergeant!"

"Didn't expect to see you again!"

"Why not?"

"Thought you must be dead!"

"Oh, rot!"

Did I redden. Bouguet whispered to me:

"You must keep your eyes open. Some of 'em try to do a bunk on the Q. T.!"

I did not feel quite sure that he was not pulling my leg. Henriot bellowed:

"Yes, yes. Keep it up. Fire away!"

No detail as to the sight, or target, or the length of range. A man was missing! Guillaumin who crawled past, exclaimed:

"You ought to have been there, you see!"

Henriot now corrected himself:

"Cease firing! Advance!"

He got up and repeated the order. Nobody stirred. He lay down again and looked at us as if asking for advice. I pretended not to notice it. The men feverishly continued to bring their rifles to the shoulder, fire them, and reload.

I dropped on Moulard who was lying just behind

Trichet and barely escaped hitting him at every shot he fired. Trichet drew back looking dazed, without seeming to understand.

The worthy Gaudéreaux who was beside him was firing precipitously.

But at what? At what?

In his agitation he got his lock jammed. I took hold of his rifle which burnt my hand. It took me a long while to repair the damage and I repeated:

"Why, in thunder, are you so set on playing with your trigger?"

Our losses were still slight. Only one man hit, in Guillaumin's section. But on ahead I caught sight of a barbed-wire entanglement surrounding a field. An unpleasant obstacle! And it was in our sector all right!

There was probably a ditch too. Henriot shouted: "Here goes for cover!"

He started off courageously, and this time the men followed him. We covered the intervening space in a single rush, a foolish mistake which cost us two men. Judsi delighted his lads by imitating a horse's gallop.

The bullets shrieked over our heads as we crouched in the ditch. We let off a few desultory shots on the chance of hitting something. A minute or two passed. The subaltern was worrying about how to cross this entanglement! . . .

"It's quite simple," said Guillaumin. "Who's got the wire-nippers?"

"I have," said Corporal Bouguet.

Henriot hesitated:

"They'd better . . ."

"What?"

"Be made use of . . ."

"Very good, sir."

Bouguet calmly got up, and climbed out of the ditch. He knelt up and set to work.

"Good for you, Corporal!" shouted Bouillon.

It was a thrilling moment. The bullets whizzed and whistled all round him. He was a hero. He took his time about it, and it was a miracle that he was not hit ten times over!

"Will that do?" he asked.

"Excellently!"

He passed through the gap he had made and went and lay down in the field.

How tempted I was to admire him, but I restrained the impulse. He simply had no nerves, that was all. As for me my temperament forbade such achievements. . . .

"Our turn now," said the lieutenant. "Follow me."

He made a dash and slipped through. He was not touched either. A great piece of luck. But then suddenly he lost his head and began to run forward all alone through the hail of bullets, without looking round. He went on for about fifty yards, then stopped, and disappeared into the hole made by a shell, in all probability. Yes, he had to call to us from there. His arm waved. We realised that he would never dare to come back to fetch us!

"Well, now we're in command of the platoon!" Guillaumin said to me. "Let's each take charge of our men, what?"

He added:

"We must get on!"

"Who'll go first?" I asked.

"I will, if you like."

He raised his voice to give his orders:

"When you get through, advance in skirmishing order by the right."

He sent two men on ahead, and then joined them. The rest crowded through. There were no hitches until it got to the last men, two of whom fell, one killed outright, the other wounded.

"I say, get them to fire a round!" shouted Guillaumin.

I gave the order for a volley. It was distinctly thin, and besides that, his men, having cleared the obstacle, stupidly inclined to the left. We were firing straight into their backs. I had some difficulty in getting my men to cease firing.

Bouillon said to me:

"The lucky chaps!"

"Why?"

"To have gone through first!"

They had left two dead men behind them, whose bodies half filled up the gap.

Our turn now.

I felt strangely detached. I watched myself get up and heard myself telling off the three men nearest to me:

"Get on, you, and you, and you!"

They went, much against their will.

"Get a move on!"

The first man lost his balance just as he got to the entanglement, and fell back into the ditch. The others immediately flung themselves back again.

I turned to the next two:

"You show them the way, Trichet and Bouillon!"

Bouillon looked at me imploringly, and neither of them budged an inch.

Pffmm! Pffmm! went the bullets above us!

"Aren't you ever coming?" shouted Guillaumin.

"No. 2 section is just as good as No. 1 section, surely!" I exclaimed.

Somebody muttered:

"After you!"

I implored Bouillon to try and get one or two through.

He sighed, and called out:

"Villain . . . and Judsi, old chap, aren't you going to show them how?"

"You don't mean it?" said Judsi.

He came rolling along. Villain stood up with difficulty.

"Aa-h!"

His head burst like a hand-grenade.

Judsi ducked, giving vent to Cambronne's historical exclamation. Shaking like an aspen I wiped my sleeve on the grass.

At that instant a shot rang out among our men. What clumsiness! Beside myself, I shouted:

"Donnadiou!"

The corporal answered from his half-section. Was he there? Yes, I caught sight of him and went up to him.

"Donnadiou," I said excitedly, "I'm going on with some of the men. You'll shove the others along, see? . . . Kick them if necessary."

He looked down, and muttered something. I caught the word "wounded."

"What wounded? You wounded?"

This expression of misery and terror on his face . . . his rifle lying on the ground. With his right hand he

took hold of the other fist, and raised it with difficulty to show me. . . .

Blood was dripping from his hand. The middle finger was in a horrid mess and hung down limply, by a strand of skin; a fragment of bone was sticking out.

"Poor old chap . . ." I began.

But I suddenly had an intuition. The man's eyes avoided me.

"It's a put-up job," I shouted down his ear; "you've done it yourself!"

I shook him roughly by the shoulder. The wretched creature tottered, and fell on his side, protecting his mutilated hand.

"You hound!"

I ground my teeth:

"A good job if it kills you!"

I believe that in my rage I went so far as to kick him. . . . One's own weak moments are so easily forgotten. . . . I was choking with anger and disgust, and the agony too of being unequal to my task. . . . I was responsible; and we were hanging back behind all the others, making a gap in the front of attack.

Our comrades who had gone on began to abuse us.

"A lot o' bloomin' funks!"

"Going to stay behind are you?"

I was forced to act. I felt my mind lashed by the burning blast of decision.

I began by rebuckling my pack behind my shoulders. Freedom for one's arms was an obvious necessity.

I stood up and said in a firm tone:

"We've not done yet; we've got to get through!"

My cheeks were scorching. Everyone was looking at me. I think I gave the impression of the most absolute coolness.

"Come along! Come along! Bouillon . . .!"

I reached the gap without hurrying myself. Pffmm! Pffmm! That terrible buzzing. . . . I got through and shouted imperiously:

"Hurry up! Hurry up there!"

I was standing up. I had set them in motion. Bouillon, Lamalou, and some others hurried along, bending down. . . . Someone shouted:

"Lie down, Sergeant, lie down!"

I lost all consciousness of what was passing. I was thinking of a thousand other things—of my brother. . . . I calmly wondered if he had been killed in this way. However, some instinct urged me to kneel down, and then the realisation of the danger we were in seized me. . . . If only I could have thrown myself down and lain still! But ten of my men were still on the other side. I felt bound to wait until the last one had come through. And they did not hurry themselves! How bitter I felt. All my senses were waking up again. I was annoyed with myself for exposing myself like this, but I could not prevent myself from doing so.

I had got them all over at last! Guillaumin got his *poilus* together for a new rush.

"Advance!"

Nobody dropped out; nobody, that is, except two poor lads who were killed on the spot.

"At the gallop!" cried Judsi, who was once more pretending to be a horse.

I signed to them to keep extended order. We ran along like that for about one hundred yards, almost

without casualties, and then crowded all together behind a narrow tank.

There was heavy firing for a few minutes; a relaxation for the nerves! Two hundred and fifty yards! At the edge of the wood! Fire! I had given my orders quite at random.

Bouillon assured me emphatically that he could make out the peaked helmets. I, too, was firing madly, as an excuse for giving no more directions.

I suddenly saw Henriot beside me; he shouted:

“Cease firing!”

And leaning towards me, said:

“Steady on; you must husband your ammunition!
And the show's over for today!”

Over? It was only then that I noticed that the sun had just disappeared, that the night was falling. The engrossing struggle had robbed us of all idea of time.

CHAPTER XII

WE COLLECT OURSELVES

"No! Call yourselves *poilus!*" Bouillon exclaimed.

We looked at each other, and at the strained faces smeared with sweat and powder, the torn great-coats, the knees and hands covered with earth. But what a feeling of buoyancy! In me most of all! I dared not predict the issue of the battle. Victory or defeat, that seemed of very slight importance to me, I admit, compared with the fact that I was still alive.

The night was falling. Behind us was the river, indicated by the dark waving of the willow-trees and in the distance the slopes of the farther bank were all enveloped in a haze of wan violet tones.

The captain was on his rounds.

"Well, what did you think of it, Dreher?" he asked me.

"Most interesting, sir!"

He went away, after giving me a cordial glance from his piercing eyes.

I sounded Henriot. Was there any hope of a distribution of . . . ?

"None at all! Ssh! Don't let's talk about that!"

Certain measures were taken in view of a possible attack, and some rough trenches made. I wondered that volunteers were found for sentry-duty, and others

for a fatigue party, led by Guillaumin, in search of water.

The latter for that matter looked after everything. He had directed the trench-digging and had made out the casualty returns, and then, being quite indefatigable, he left us to go and get news of the other platoons.

Rolled up in my great-coat, I was wishing for nothing so much as a doze, when he reappeared.

"Well?"

"I say, I've just heard a heart-breaking bit of news!"

"What? Who?"

"Poor little Frémont!"

I raised myself on my elbow:

"Oh. Is he hit!"

"Badly hit, apparently!"

My heart contracted. What a nightmare! That child who had been with me on the highroad yesterday, whom I had led on . . . ! I saw him growing pale at the sight of the stretchers . . . was it a presentiment . . . ? And I had a vision of him on the bench in the garden the other day, folding his darling in his arms.

Guillaumin's thoughts had kept pace with mine.

"His wife," he said. "How sad it is! And you know she was expecting . . . that they . . . had hopes . . ."

"Yes, I know."

We were silent for a moment. Dull misery was brewing in me. Then Guillaumin got up; he wanted to spend his night beside his men.

"And I," I said, in a strangled voice, "you have no suspicions?"

"You! What about it?"

"My brother . . . "

"Well?"

"Has been killed."

"You're mad! How in the world could you know?"

"I heard it this morning."

He stammered:

"You. . . . Your brother . . . the subaltern?"

"Yes."

He seized my hand.

"Michel. . . . Why . . . didn't you tell me about it?"

My Christian name! I had quite got out of the habit of hearing it. I was touched, and pressed his warm hands. Tears rose to my eyes. I experienced the sad and yet sweet consolation which the affection of living people brings in the presence of death. He was a true friend. I admired the delicacy which made him hold his peace; so many people would have thought of nothing at that moment except of lavishing a flow of unmeaning words on me. He silently shared in my mourning.

At last he said simply:

"I am thinking of my sister. If I were killed . . . or if she were to die! . . ."

He lingered for a few minutes, sitting beside me in the grass. There was a hallowed silence. . . . Friendship, the purest of manly sentiments, revealed itself to me in force. . . .

I was the one to suggest he should go; he needed his sleep.

We pressed hands again.

"Mind you sleep, Michel."

"Good-night, Claude. . . ."

He went away. I leaned my forehead on my arm,

and tried to get to sleep, but my face was burning. What strange tumultuous thoughts besieged me.

I caught myself repeating: "Victor, my poor Victor!" But this time something was rent asunder. A veil fell. The artificial atmosphere in which all my joys and sorrows had been deadened for so long was dissipated.

My man's heart began to bleed. I became conscious of my grief. Without diminishing it I could now compare it, without blasphemy, with that other, into which the death of my mother had formerly plunged me. A double regret, identical, I felt in its essential point, for these two beings were of my blood, my nearest relations, a little of myself. Part of my life and future were buried with them. I understood now what an irrecoverable part my brother had played in my life. I had loved him when a child, and my childhood would never be renewed. Our gaze and our minds had awakened to the same things. A thousand memories were ours, ours alone. O Victor, I remembered the grace of your eighth, your tenth year. Our wild games in the big house at Tours, and in the summer holidays in the big garden at Emberménil. I admired you and adored you, my strong elder brother, who never abused your strength, who used to consent to being the "horse," out of your turn very often, so that I might hold the reins. When you brought friends home you did not like me, the youngest of the band, to be "ticked," and when I was "it" too long, you let yourself be caught on purpose.

I could remember my brother leaving for La Flèche as clearly as if it had been yesterday. I was inconsolable. I was seven years old, and in my unhappiness I refused to eat any pudding for a whole week!

I was just beginning to write. With a great effort I managed to cover a page for him every week. When he came back at Christmas, looking very smart in his new uniform, how delighted, how overjoyed I had been.

And then, little by little, we had drifted apart.

My brother! I had not really known him! I never should know him. Oh, the anguish of that thought. The fault had been on my side, for he in his affection had made many advances. The hope of putting an end to the misunderstanding between us never left him. Even quite lately certain words of his showed his fondness for me. But I had always repulsed him—he was shy, in spite of his handsome energetic appearance—by my arrogance and coldness.

Why had I decreed, ever since I was sixteen, that it was absurd for men to kiss, and at our next meeting had put out my hand to stop his customary greeting?

How many times, it was more like a hundred than one, he must have been grieved by my harshness and indifference before having resigned himself to it. And had he ever resigned himself to it?

Was it necessary that he should fall, to bring me to repentance. Alas! If only he could have seen me now, me the egoist, pouring out bitter, precious tears for him, the first for ten years.

I seemed to have been born anew to the deeper human feelings. Access to a sublime region was given back to me. My heart, which had been shrivelled and hardened for so long, softened and expanded. In a transport of generosity I tried to think who there was still left for me to love on earth.

The thought of my sister-in-law occurred to me first. I knew that, in her great love for Victor, she

would have welcomed me as a brother as eagerly as she had welcomed a father. It was I again who had discouraged her advances. I reproached myself for it. I foresaw the hope of atoning for it. This death would create certain duties for me. Madeleine had lost her parents, she had no relations except a married sister at Versailles. When once my father had gone, I should be the head of the family, the children's natural guardian.

I thought of the little things' future. I would look after Xavier's education, and guide him towards a fine career. And I saw the little girl grow up. We would let her marry where her heart led her.

I thought of my father with reverence too. Our sorrow drew us nearer to each other. I imagined him being abandoned by his strength, when he heard the news. My courage and my pity would support him without humiliating him. I even dreamt that his love, robbed of its object, would end by being concentrated entirely upon me. Was it only a fancy? I remembered his clasp, and his voice which changed when we bid each other farewell.

Thus my thoughts strayed to each of my dear ones. I paused at each vision to enjoy it. But it seemed to me that behind them all another was hiding, undecided whether to appear or not! Suddenly a light shone forth . . . a silhouette rose up, of a child, slim and fair, with a grave sweet smile, and tender eyes. It was such a dazzling apparition that I thought of adorning it and setting it up as a secret goddess in the inmost depths of my being to preside over my regeneration.

I tried to sweep aside the idol, to dispel the nimbus of illusions. . . . What did an exchange of post-cards,

as a continuation of our talks in the holidays, signify?

The phantom refused to fade away; it reigned, pure and enthralling, in my consciousness. It was becoming an obsession. I decided to get up and take a turn.

The silent night enveloped everything, things and people, our line and the enemy's. Most of the men were sleeping, tired out, but the sentries, standing a few yards ahead, peered into the mysterious darkness.

In No. 2 platoon some of the men were still talking below their breath. I recognised the voices of Judsi and Corporal Bouguet.

"There ain't nothing wrong with the lieutenant, but 'e loses 'is 'ead!"

"Tell you who's a bit of all right, and that's the sergeants!"

"As for Dreher, 'e knocked me silly, that 'e did. 'E's a cove wot won't stop at nothink, 'e is."

I did not listen any longer, but passed by, smiling. I was touched, and surprised at being so. And I thought, "Father, father, if only you could hear them! . . ."

BOOK VI

August 14th-25th

CHAPTER XIII

A VICTORIOUS DAWN

THE cold woke me as usual. I was stiff with cramp from my left shoulder down to my hip . . . It would be a miracle if we did not all get our deaths of rheumatism.

An oppressive silence reigned. I put my hand out to feel the grass damp with dew. I could make out the shadow of my comrades a few yards away.

I rubbed myself and stretched my muscles. I was really remarkably fit on the whole, and the excruciating contraction in my side soon disappeared. I looked out. The Huns yonder must be dreading our awakening. I tried to recall the magnanimous feelings with which I had lulled myself to sleep a few hours ago, but I was too drowsy. Only one vision consented to charm me, the face of a young girl.

"At the wheel already, Dreher?"

It was the subaltern. He told me he had not slept much.

"There might have been a counter-attack! I had to keep on at my rounds!"

When he was just on the point of going away, he said:

"I say, Dreher, I hear, that is, Guillaumin told me, your brother . . . !"

"Oh, so you know about it. It has been a great blow!"

"We'll revenge him all right," he assured me.

A lot of good that would do me, I thought.

There was nothing to show where the east was. An indefinite brightness however replaced the darkness by insensible degrees. The tops of the willow-trees at the bottom of the valley were emerging from a woolly haze.

All our lot were up and about, now. The cooks found a way, without consulting the lieutenant, of going to make the coffee a few hundred yards to the rear.

Judsi, who brought up the first bucketful, said to me:

"Give us your mug, Sergeant!"

"I go in with the '10th,'" I objected, but he assured me that it would give them so much pleasure, we'd got on so well yesterday.

I let him give me some, and tasted it.

"Clinking, your coffee."

"Here's to you!"

Big Henry soon came up on behalf of the other half-section; and I had to accept a second cupful, in order to prevent any jealousy. What enchanted me was that I had won the esteem of these fellows—at small cost, goodness knows!

A little firing had been heard for the last few minutes, but only in the distance, strange to say! Nothing serious so far!

The quartermaster-sergeant passed, inquiring what ammunition we had left! Nothing very great! We had played havoc with it.

"No more need of bullets!" Guillaumin interrupted joyously. "We're going to do some storming now!"

I had not seen him since last night. Unbrushed, unshaven, his dirty face shining. Was this, I thought, henceforward to be my friend, my best friend? I would not allow myself to be ill-natured.

He was wanted by Henriot, and crawled away. It was the only mode of progression permitted. I was not sorry he had gone. I should have found nothing to say to him. The prospect of a bayonet charge obviously inflamed and excited him, just like that savage Lamalou who was boasting that he would skewer, how many?—one, two, three—who would have a bet on it?

As for me, I admit that I dreaded those two hundred yards across that no-man's-land (the last rush for how many of us!), and what followed, still more the hand-to-hand fight with the bayonet, the horrible butchery, the atrocious phase of the fighting for which no one prepares, for no one would face it in cold blood.

We had to wait for orders, for a long time, crouching behind the earthworks with our rifles in our hands.

It had got quite light.

All at once, exclamations were heard.

We looked round.

A hussar was galloping across the fields behind us.

"'E's arskin' ter be napoo'd!" Judsi exclaimed.

What a target indeed! How could the enemy help having a shot!

The horseman raced along the line, and disappeared. Not a single shot had been fired by the Bosches. A

few minutes of trying suspense passed. Then a rumour ran along the line. Some of the men showed signs of getting up.

"Lie down!" Henriot commanded.

But we saw Breton walking quickly towards us, without the customary precautions. His face was beaming!

When still thirty yards off, he shouted:

"Nobody ahead of us now!"

"What?"

"They sloped off in the night!"

The news flew from mouth to mouth. An ingenuous, delirious joy took hold of our companions. A broadside of jokes burst forth.

"The 'Allemands' funk'd us!"

Judsi chuckled.

"W'en the blighters saw the 1.3 being brought along . . . they said to themselves: 'Nothing to be done but to 'ook it.'"

I breathed again! I marvelled at the fulfilment of my private wish. No more danger for the moment. I should not be killed this morning!

The hussar, who had brought the news, appeared again, and deliberately urged his horse towards the woods, the zone which yesterday had been inaccessible. There was a new outburst of delight, and the men began to rag the sentries who had been on duty during the night:

"Gaudéreaux, w'y couldn't 'ee tell us they'd done a bink. You was snoozin', you old blighter, I dew believe."

Half an hour later, when arms had been piled, and the men dismissed to rest, Guillaumin took me by the arm:

"Let's go and see what's become of the others!"

We met De Valpic on the way. He had not slept either, and was afraid he had caught a cold. . . .

"You'll not be the only one, my dear chap!"

A few steps farther on there was a little group, the Humel-Playoust lot. We went up to them, delighted to find them safe and sound. I don't know what put the idea into my head of tapping Descroix on the shoulder and saying to him:

"Good biz. The N. C. O.'s haven't come off so badly, what?"

He turned round in a fury.

"What do you mean?"

I understood. He must have thought I was alluding to that stupid affair of the stripes, which had gone quite out of my head. So I turned to Humel:

"Was it you who saw Frémont fall?"

"Yes."

"Where was he hit?"

"Oh, look here! One has all one can do to look after oneself!"

The quartermaster-sergeant was making signs to us in the distance. We went towards him. Guillaumin enlightened me on the way.

"That Descroix business was a put-up job, you know. He doesn't like it talked about."

"All the worse if it was arranged beforehand!"

Breton, who had joined us, took us to a clump of trees. When we got there he said:

"Look here!"

A German officer was standing up leaning lightly against a shield. His field-glasses were up to his eyes, and he seemed to be gazing through the opening.

Was he alive or dead? We hesitated but soon found out when we got nearer.

"Rather neat, what?" said Breton.

While ferreting about near by, Guillaumin came across a shell-hole. He exclaimed:

"The work of the 75's. No wound, apparently. Simply the effect of the concussion."

Then with a knowing wink:

"Pretty hot stuff these Turpin machines, what?"

We looked for a few seconds at the big well-built man with regular features, in the tightly fitting uniform trimmed with frogs. Some of the men who had come up formed a circle round us. Lamalou, without any hesitation, put his hand on the shoulder of the dead body. . . .

I shall never forget the horror of it! The legs remained firmly fixed, but the upper half of the body fell apart, as if it had been a mannequin made in two pieces.

We bolted, but the *poilus* called to each other cheerily to come and have a look.

The halt continued; we extended the range of our walk as far as the quarter occupied by the other battalion. We came across friends at every other step, and greetings and hand clasps were more cordial than usual:

"No bad news, of your lot?"

And the rep'y was awaited with the curious mixture of curiosity and apprehension with which the list of victims is perused the day following a catastrophe.

We produced a painful effect each time. At the name of Frémont a look of sincere commiseration appeared on all the faces. Everyone loved him for his charm, and his good nature, this boy with the look

of a girl, and the memory of his romance secretly touched all their hearts.

The losses did not appear to be very serious; on the whole, our company was among those to have suffered most.

Someone announced that Denais, the big fellow in the 19th, had been killed right at the beginning by a splinter of shrapnel.

“Denais!”

I was thunderstruck. We had been bed-neighbours for a week, once, in the infirmary. We had seen a lot of him at F—even during the last few days. I could see his face contracting at the notes of the “Funeral March.” I heard him cry: “Oh, shut up! It’s idiotic! . . .” And now he had “gone west.”

What struck me most was that his disappearance did not seem to affect any one. Not a single regret was expressed. At the “Peloton” he had always, like myself, been one of those who knew how to get out of things, difficult—again like me—to “catch out,” like me polite and sarcastic. General opinion classed us together as thorough egoists.

“And how about your foot?” Guillaumin asked me. “How’s it getting on?”

It had not entered my head again!

“All the better! Because now we shall have to fight chiefly on our legs!”

“Do you think so?”

“We shall have to follow them up!”

“Rot!”

He looked at me.

“By Jove, you don’t look much as if you realised that we have just gained a victory.”

I shrugged my shoulders, and he continued:

"It must be rather a knock for the Bosches! A repetition of Mulhouse. . . ."

I poured cold water on his enthusiasm. The enemy had retired of themselves and had not been forced to by us; a manoeuvre on their part, perhaps. And we saw only such a small part, a very small part.

Guillaumin grew heated and hurled himself into nebulous strategical problems. I enjoyed urging him on. At last he almost lost his temper.

"We'll go and ask the subaltern!"

Henriot was coming towards us just having left an officers' confabulation.

"Well?"

"Ah!" he exclaimed, raising his cap, "our success is even more complete than we had hoped!"

"Hm!"

Guillaumin smacked me on the back.

Descroix and Humel, and all that lot, joined us again.

"I've got some details," Henriot announced breathlessly. "Here . . ."

His recital only confirmed the version I had had from Dagomert. After a partial repulse, after allowing the Germans to cross the Othain, and the Loison, possibly for tactical reasons, we had suddenly taken the offensive. The enemy had retired in disorder. One regiment had been completely wiped out by fire. . . . Henriot quoted the regimental number:

"The 23rd Württembergers!"

We had taken some prisoners, and booty, and captured field- and machine-guns, according to the reports.

During the hullabaloo which followed, I asked:

"So things are going alright?"

Humel sneered.

"Oh, really, nothing pleases that chap!"

I continued:

"It's all very well, but who knows what's happening elsewhere?"

"And what's happening in Timbuctoo?"

"Round about Nancy? And in the North?"

Guillaumin laughed:

"Dreher will have it that we can't be equally lucky everywhere!"

Henriot roared with laughter!

"Oh rot, they're in the soup!"

The group dispersed. Guillaumin went on talking to the lieutenant. I stayed with them, without taking part in their conversation. I was depressed again. Why? Good God, what did I want? I envied the delirious delight betrayed by every look and word and deed in my companions. I should have liked to vibrate in communion with those tens of thousands of men, my brothers by race, who covered the surrounding country; and I caught a glimpse behind them of the enormous mass, my nation, in whom the news of our success would have let loose such a frenzy of joy.

What did I lack to raise me to the desired pitch of excitement? I appealed to other considerations of an equally exalting nature: the renewal of our greatness, the virtue of our proud blood. We were overthrowing the greatest enemy in the world, at the first encounter. Revenge was a fine thing after all . . . ! The pride of fulfilling this hope of our fathers. It was thus that I succeeded in fanning myself into a semblance of enthusiasm.

My companions left me, eager to walk and talk, to enjoy to the full this triumph which each of them felt

was his own particular property. Left alone I soon proved that the entirely artificial fervour to which I had raised myself was subsiding by degrees. The springs of my mind were stagnant.

We were certain to start again, and starting again would mean pushing forward, following them up—Guillaumin had been quite right—re-entering Lorraine, with flags flying to be saluted as her liberators. Heavens! Surely that was enough to make a soldier's heart beat high. What would have been my father's and my brother's exaltation! To think that I was not a whit moved by it. I stripped the exploits to come of their prestige. What awaited us was simply new fatigues and torturing privations.

And I was terrified above all else, far above all else, by the spectre of the future battles. Could one risk one's life twice with impunity! I had escaped the first time by a miracle. Let me profit by it! I had been wrested from repose and security. Had I not already drawn from this campaign more than the benefit anticipated! I had my share of memories which would last me all my life. I had ascertained that I, even I, was capable of a kind of heroism. What a gain! And a boon that was more precious still, I had regained consciousness of the ties which bound me to a small number of human beings. I longed to be with them again. I would bring them a man infinitely more worthy of them. I had two cards in my pocket. A third had gone to a girl. . . . Would that one ever reach its destination? Would it be answered . . . soon?

Lulled by these dreams, I discovered in them an excuse for the drowsiness which enfolded me. What I experienced was only human. Why a Roman rigour?

If I did not burn to risk everything blindly in an adventure of regeneration, if I let myself be touched by the idea of a calm life spent among companions of my choice, if, in order that such a desire might be fulfilled, I caught myself wishing for a cessation of hostilities, an armistice, or an "honourable" peace of some kind, good God, was it anything to be ashamed of? What right had all the great sentiments in the world to suppress my humble wish to be happy?

CHAPTER XIV

EN ROUTE AGAIN

SOME time passed by. A distant fusillade crackled for a moment. The big guns boomed for an hour, and then were silent. It was becoming doubtful whether we should go on that day. Henriot got impatient. The men asked for nothing better than to start again. When once the rations had been issued and the cooks had dished up a hot meal, we could manage.

There was some question of a party of us being told off to bury the dead. I dreaded lest this fatigue should fall to us; I foresaw how horrible it would be. We luckily escaped it. An unexpected order came for the battalion to move on.

I noticed that we were going northwards, in the direction of the enemy. We were preceded by patrol parties, and reconnoitring cavalry covered us.

The march was not marked by any notable incident. I remembered that we passed through a big village which had been occupied up till the night before by the enemy. One would have liked to stop there, to question the inhabitants whom we were delivering from this nightmare, and make friends with them. . . . But where were they? There was nobody but old women to be seen, and on their waxen faces I

thought I made out a strange resentful expression. Why resentful? Because their village had been abandoned, and left if only for a few hours to the mercy of the invaders, who had taken the healthy men with them when they left, and had said: "We shall come back, but next time we shall not leave one stone upon another."

We got hot, marching. I was possessed by the thought of poor De Valpic dying of thirst. I ended by going to find him, and offering to share what was left in my water-bottle with him. He refused to accept it, and I had to force it on him, but this scene which was repeated twice a day bored me.

Bouillon noticed my annoyance and realised the reason for it. He hailed the cyclist, a man named Ducostal, and gave him to understand that my water-bottle leaked.

"Try to get hold of one for the sergeant! Enough poor lads have been knocked out with them!"

"Righto!" said the other. "I'm just taking a stroll across to the field ambulance."

Just on the chance I begged him to ask for news of Sergeant Frémont of the 22nd, down there.

He went off. I felt certain that he would forget both commissions.

During the long halt in a field by the roadside, some troops came into sight. We went to have a look, because it was a regiment of regulars, which had been heavily engaged, we knew, during the last few days.

We were at once struck by the gait of these men. They were advancing very slowly and seemed to have to make an effort to raise their legs at each step they took. They halted. When arms had been piled

many of them did not even take the time to undo their packs, but let themselves fall where they stood. Several of them went to sleep instantly.

They were worn out. Three days' fighting without a pause and three nights. . . . The terrible nervous armed multitude, not a gesture, not a cry of joy in honour of this victory which they had won. Not to speak of the uniforms stained with mud and dust, and some in rags. The terrible part was these dull, ravaged faces, with their scared and dazed expressions.

I went down their line in silence. What gaps there were in these ranks! In one platoon there were only fifteen men left. A fair-haired corporal on the ground was trying to get to sleep, but the flies persecuted him. I chased them away.

"Thanks," he said.

I knelt down and asked him:

"How have you got on?"

He turned a dull eye on me, and answered in a broken voice, interrupted by dismaying silences:

"We're done. . . . Ever since the other morning—what day is it? . . . we have done nothing but fire . . . and be fired at. At night too. . . . They kept us on the hop . . . with their whizz-bangs and bombs. . . . Without rot, there were times . . . when we envied those who fell, because they could at least pause for a while. . . . Look here, yesterday evening when the rations arrived . . . well . . . no one had the strength . . . to put the stuff into their mouths. They had to send some dragoons . . . up . . . from the rear . . . to feed us . . . we would rather have gone under."

I left him. I understood now why the conquerors

do not usually take full advantage of their victory. And I thought that to-morrow it would perhaps be our turn to go through it all.

We had just started off again when Ducostal turned up. He handed me a new water-bottle:

"Here you are, Sergeant!"

"Thanks. You're a ripper!"

"Do you know, nobody knew your pal," he continued. "I was sent from pillar to post. Then at last I had the luck to come across the bloke who picked him up. He's not dead, but it'll be a near thing if he pulls through. Got a ball through the lungs."

"Oh, I hope to goodness he'll recover!" I said out loud.

I had fumbled with my purse in my pocket, and slipped a piece of silver into the man's hand. He looked at it, and then gave it back.

"No, Sergeant, we're not out to make at this game. You stick to it."

"And then," he added, "do you remember one morning when you were sergeant of the guard you didn't report me missing?"

The incident occurred to me. So he was the fellow who had turned up one morning, after a day's leave, and implored me to mark him down as having come back at midnight.

"Oh, so you haven't forgotten that?"

"Rather not. We don't forget the sahibs, any more than we forget the wasters."

I was decidedly in a fair way to becoming popular.

At the next halt, I went to find De Valpic:

"Look here, old chap, do you see what I've managed to get hold of for you?"

I held up the new water-bottle.

"And what about you?"

I tapped my own.

"I've got mine, but it worried me to see you without one. . . ."

While I was helping him to adjust it, and to unbutton his shoulder-straps, he tried to say something to me:

"Dreher . . ." he began twice.

I interrupted him. I was unusually good-humoured, and gaily told him of my experience with Judsi the day before. I added:

"You have to know how to tackle these chaps."

I asked him if he had seen that wretched regiment.

In this way I managed to fill up the two minutes' halt.

"*Au revoir*, old fellow!"

When I left him I whistled, and felt tremendously cheery. I believe I deluded myself into thinking that I had played the Good Samaritan.

The day's march was lengthening. Henriot was anxious about the direction we were taking.

"Where are they taking us to?"

We were bearing distinctly westwards. Guillaumin suddenly came up to me and pointed out that our company had been detached from the rest and was marching alone.

Were they going to make us take outpost duty? There was no further doubt about it when our platoon went on alone, leaving the rest of the 22nd as supports in a farm. The lieutenant had his instructions; he sent out scouts and made us advance trailing arms.

In about ten minutes when we had just entered the woods, he said:

"Here we are!"

An important crossroads. The site was well chosen.

CHAPTER XV

A NIGHT ON OUTPOST DUTY

I PASS over the arrangements of our pickets. Each one of us knew his duties, and acquitted himself conscientiously in his part. Henriot made a thorough reconnaissance. When he came back he showed me a plan which he had picked up.

“By way of practice, do you see? Our maps only go as far as the Rhine!”

At dusk, a lukewarm meal was brought to us from the supports.

The gloom grew more intense. Our vigil was beginning.

We established ourselves in a clearing about twenty yards from the road. The stumps of some trees which had been cut down were utilised as seats, a lot of us sat cross-legged, either on the ground, or on little tufts of brushwood, which were a poor protection against the damp. No fire, of course. By the flickering light of two dim section-lanterns placed on the ground we could make out the carpet of trampled grasses, and a big black circle, the remains of a log fire.

What a night that was. During the first few hours Guillaumin and Henriot never ceased chattering below their breath. I wondered that their fatigue

had not more hold over them. I only half listened to their conversation which still concerned our victorious march, and the demoralised enemy flying before the sword. Speed, they declared, speed must come before everything else. We must fall upon the Bosches in the rear before they had time to recover themselves.

The first excitement occurred towards ten o'clock, a shot in the distance, on our left. Everyone leapt to his feet. Another, and still another. . . . There was no doubt about it; the sentries' orders had been so explicit; there was to be no firing except in case of danger or surprise. No. 3 picket, next to us, had surely been attacked. Henriot, much agitated, repeated the instructions: at a given signal, we were to extend and fall back on the support. . . .

"It was not our business to put up a fight. . . ."

The surprising thing was that the firing was dying down. We remained on the alert, and it was not ten minutes before new shots rang out, on our right this time, at No. 1 picket.

"They're crazy!"

Henriot fumed.

"The lunatics! Now our whole line of outposts will be marked!"

He was proud that our lot had kept their heads. But it was somewhat previous. A shot burst out in the wood, a hundred yards away, then a second: three, four, six. We saw a man rush up stammering distractedly: "Someone had come up, he had challenged them, they had not stopped, his comrades had been carried off. . . ."

Not very encouraging! However, eight or ten volunteers offered to go and see what the matter was. On the way whom should we meet but the com-

rade in question, who was on the lookout and slightly uneasy, but made great fun of his companion, who had apparently fired at some shadows. Henriot was annoyed and inclined to be hard on him. Lamalou went to him.

"Blackguard 'im if yer like, sir, but don't 'ave 'im punished. It's always the same story o' nights just at fust, you sees and 'ears things!"

He spoke from his experience in the African bush. Henriot calmed down, and agreed that the sentinels were too far from the reserve picket; the arrangement of them was altered.

This continued all night . . . shots, quite near at hand or some far away, marking out the zone which was being patrolled. We soon got accustomed to it. At the end of two hours no one worried about it any longer, indeed not enough.

An overpowering desire to sleep began to take possession of us. Over and over again I almost gave way. My head nodded, my eyelids closed. Then Guillaumin gave me a shake.

"Halloa, there, don't leave us in the lurch!"

Henriot rubbed it in!

"Remember we are responsible for the security of the whole army."

There was no gainsaying the fact that he behaved in the most praiseworthy fashion, sparing himself no pains. He was always to be seen on his feet, going to shake up the men who were reeling with weariness. Towards midnight, the critical time, he suddenly proposed that we should play games. I thought at first that he was joking. But no, he had undertaken to keep us awake at all costs. He must treat the children in his school in the same way.

Childish occupation kept us amused for a long while. The greatest success was the game of Old Mother Perlimpin Pin which soon had to be stopped as the laughter was becoming so uproarious.

Towards two o'clock in the morning a thunder shower came on. We were soon soaked to the skin.

"In ordinary life," joked Guillaumin, "we should have kicked the bucket after a night like this."

I offered to go the rounds with the object of keeping myself awake.

The first sentry challenged me at a good distance. It was Judsi. He was calmly smoking a cigarette.

"Smoking's not allowed, Judsi."

"Pooh. It's a bit o' coompany. That won't stop a chap keepin' 'is eyes skinned."

But directly I had pointed out that the point of light might betray his presence at a distance, he gave way:

"That's true enough, that is."

He instantly threw his cigarette away in the damp grass.

I wanted to try an experiment on the next sentry-group and continued to advance after the order to "Halt!" Very well! I saw my two fine fellows both order arms again.

"Well, what are you up to? This is a nice state of affairs." I reproached them.

"We recognised you, Sergeant!"

"That doesn't matter, you ought to have made me halt."

"But as we recognised you!"

It was impossible to get them to alter their opinion. As for the last two sentries, they simply "about-turned" on the spot; that is to say, that at the first suspicious sound they fired on the picket.

I saw how unhinged and overwrought they were, and had pity on them. I ended by promising to say nothing about it to the subaltern.

I found the latter on his knees. He had spread out his map, which was beginning to get torn, and was saying to Guillaumin that we should do no more than screen Metz; the chief thing was to push straight on to Mayence, the key to the whole of the Rhine district.

The rain stopped, and some time passed. Towards four o'clock Henriot shyly suggested:

"Would it bore you frightfully to go out with a patrol party?"

"On the contrary!"

The idea appealed to me. By gad, I was not sorry to be able to stretch my legs. I chose four men. Bouillon who had just been on outpost duty absolutely insisted on being one of them. He was not going to let me go alone. He was certainly a good chap!

We plunged into the darkness. Hardly had we gone a hundred yards before it seemed as if we were a hundred miles away from the picket and its protection. We were in the middle of the forest, the gloom was intense. Silent raindrops dripped on to our shoulders and caps from the foliage above our heads. My companions followed in my footsteps. I was not only ahead of this patrol, but ahead of the whole army, a daring explorer sent out towards the enemy, who was perhaps lying in ambush. I often stood still and silently gazed into the darkness. I had told my men to regulate their movements by mine, but we were almost invisible to each other. Sometimes I distinguished . . . that noise of muffled marching . . . didn't it come from in front? Or again when I heard some branch crack in the under-

wood, my heart thumped unevenly; I caught my breath; I thought I made out forms, phantoms crouching, yonder . . . ready to hurl themselves. . . . How agonising it was!

How much more courage I had need of than when under fire. I regretted yesterday's danger in comparison. I opened my mouth to shout, "Everyone for himself!" My trembling knees wanted to fly. But here, as on the day before, what urged me on against my will was the presence of the men who saw in me their leader. The consciousness of my rôle, of my authority which must be kept up, seized me by the collar. I had to go on, and I went on. I got safely past the place where I had feared the ambush. For a moment I was delighted to have surmounted this terror, delighted even to have experienced it. What a chapter it added to my campaign impressions! What a joy it would be one day to recall these deadly terrors, if only I escaped them.

It was an interminable journey. The subaltern had told me to follow the road up to the edge of the wood. Having arrived there I was to take a certain road whence I should get excellent views over a large stretch of country.

We continued to advance. Our shoes squelched in the soft loam, and got covered with lumps of mud. We were splashed at each puddle. Our feet were soaked, our hands, pinched with cold, clutched convulsively at our rifles.

It was nearly forty minutes since we had left the clearing. From time to time a shot on our left reassured us; a sentry group was on the lookout there. I was still watching for the road which ought to turn off on our right. The forest just lately had given place

to a bushy thicket. The sky was already paling, and in the clear transparency I saw the beginning of a bridle-path. What a relief! All we had to do now was to skirt the hostile zone, instead of continuing to penetrate into it, more terrified at each step.

The path climbed the side of the hill. We occasionally caught a glimpse of a misty expanse. Farther on, the view opened out, and we lay down flat on our faces, our elbows resting on the dewy grass of a hillock.

The sky tone was neutral. The chief features in the landscape were lent precision by the coming dawn. At our feet pearl-grey meadows sloped gently down to a highway bordered with trees, which might be followed northwards for miles, running in a straight line between two rounded hills. On the left there was a bizarre eminence, abrupt and bald; on the right two steeples, one of which rose at a short distance away behind a stretch of colourless heath. A mist hung about, dimming the surfaces and blurring the outlines. Another gloomy day in the making.

"See anything, Bouillon?"

"Never a Bosche!" he declared.

Our glance probed each particle of ground. There was nothing suspicious, in the plain, or on the roads, which looked like huge ribbons. The enemy appeared to have melted away. Our field of view increased, the shadows were dispersing, and the horizon seemed to recoil. Still nothing to be seen.

"They must 'ave 'ad a scare."

Our mission was apparently at an end. It was up to the aeroplanes to take observations of the enemy's new positions. One of the war-birds happened to be flying over yonder at that moment, but we were un-

deceived when it approached, and we recognised a Taube.

“Let’s be getting back!”

“Say, Sergeant, the country’s not so dusty!”

Touched and curious, did we foresee the miracle with which daybreak was to endow us?

Here was the luminous veil of the aerial vault above us being rent and scattered. Shreds of the more transparent vapours still floated in the air, but the depths had ceased to look so uniformly dust-coloured. It was not long before cracks and then fissures and then chasms were hollowed in the clouds, and the liquid blue shone out between them bathed in a diaphanous radiance. The true sky smiled at last. The fleecy clouds dispersed and vanished, a few of them lingered in the form of scarfs, so attenuated that they looked like modest nebulas. The scintillation of the stars pierced through them. They would only shine for a moment and then pale in the growing daylight, but it was enough that they had reminded the mortals, saddened by the opaque and misty night, of their existence.

The whole of spring glowed resplendent in this summer dawn. Newly awakened chaffinches chirruped and chased each other at the edge of the wood. The luscious green countryside, a sight to gladden the eyes, exhaled the fragrance of recent harvest mingled with the resinous perfume of the firs and larches sown among the beeches round about us. Now the entire firmament was clear and serene, suggested in fluctuating colouring which changed by harmonious gradations from a mauve verging on violet, in which the western sky was bathed, to the pale phosphorescence, which, on the opposite horizon heralded

the approach of Apollo. On that side the mists accumulated in the recesses of the valleys, evaporated more quickly, and rose up impalpable, the incense of the earth. Unsuspected ridges appeared. Through an opening between the two crests my wandering gaze could glide towards a blue distance, infinite as the ocean.

! A plain, a different region, seemed to open out down there. It occurred to me that the Woevre might lie in that direction. Yes, we must have reached the confines of the valley of the Meuse. Yonder my brother had fallen. I made a vague attempt to recall my sorrow and rancour, to connect my present mission with that of the army and my nation. My consciousness repelled these fierce imaginings. Taking a deep breath I inhaled the woodland scents. I chewed a stalk of grass, and dangled a corn-flower picked on the other side of the slope. I naïvely congratulated myself on being present, in the womb of nature, at the birth of each dawn, with which I, as a civilised being, had rejoiced my eyes too seldom.

The sun rose. A ray of gold touched us, appearing from the bottom of the disk. The outline of the orb was barely discernible, hidden by the triangular shadow of some peak or other, reared at an immense distance, which stood out in relief against the luminous segment. The planet as it rose hesitated for some time before adopting a shape. It stretched itself out, and capriciously widened then lengthened itself, a dark red mass upon which it was still possible for the naked eye to gaze.

I wondered vaguely where I had lately delighted in a similar vision?

The ball grew more condensed and, ceasing its

frolics on the orange line of the horizon, rose rapidly, armed with a blinding brilliance. Then—sparkling reminder—a sickle-shaped streak began to glitter on the ground below: some pond. . . A flight of memories was instantly loosed, and soared in me, and then subsided, eddying. My heart leapt at the vivid recollection. It was the Suchet morning; we had seen the sun rise from the snowy Alps, equally distended and tortuous, until the instant, when full blown, it had reflected its disk in the waters of Neufchâtel. . . .

Good God! How short a time ago it was. It was only three weeks since we had dallied happy in our youth. My memory caressed each detail of that excursion, the first glimpse we had had of the abyss in whose depths there had shone, like ships' lights, the lights of the Canton-de-Vaud—and our wait for the miracle's accomplishment in the icy atmosphere of the mountain top. In order to warm ourselves we had laughingly thrown pebbles down the slope in an endless avalanche. . . .

As I lingered dreamily over this resurrection the pictures faded away of themselves. One alone persisted, infinitely sweet. I mentally breathed the name. Seated on a rock which jutted out on a level with the ground, breathing in deep breaths of the scented air of the hilltops, turned towards the rising sun, it was yours, Jeannine, my friend. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

GOOD COMRADES

WE expected to be picked up by the battalion that same morning, to continue the march. Nothing came of it. We were simply relieved about two o'clock by the 2nd platoon.

Annoyance on the part of Henriot. He questioned Lieutenant Delafosse who succeeded him. The latter knew nothing about it, nothing at all! He was yawning. He noted the sentry's orders with a bored expression.

We rejoined the rest of the company at the farm where they remained in support of the outposts. For the first time in four days I was able to indulge in a wash and a change of linen. The joy of it. Bouillon rolled my things up into a parcel and carried them off. He was left busy all the afternoon washing, cleaning, and brushing them, while I slept on the straw.

When I woke Guillaumin announced:

"I say, we're going a bust this evening!"

He and Breton had been to "get round" the farmer's wife, who for a comparatively moderate sum had consented to hand over a couple of fine rabbits.

"How many of us will there be for them?"

"Eight. . . . No; nine, with the sergeant-major."

Oh "that lot" was going to join us? Yes, Guillaumin, who bore no grudge, had invited them. He explained that we would go shares; it would come cheaper like that!

"Haven't I done right?"

I gave my approval. I liked to think it might be the beginning of a renewal of cordiality.

Guillaumin had introduced Gaufrièreaux to the farmeress, who having quickly known him for what he was, a real virtuoso of the frying-pan and casserole, had given him a free hand. She had no reason to repent it, as she was invited to join us and share the feast. Rabbit *à la Bordelaise*, a *croûte aux champignons*, and ham *à la Provençale* reminded her of the cheer at her sister's wedding.

Playoust had persuaded her to bring out some wine. It was pronounced excellent. Much flattered, she announced her intention of giving it to us free of charge. We cheered her. We touched glasses again and again, and drank to the health of her boy, who had left on the third day of mobilisation to join her father, one of the heroes of the year '70, in the Zouaves. I am not sure that we did not drink to the health of her deceased husband.

The wag of the evening was Playoust. There was no denying that the fellow was really funny when he liked. He hummed and sang and imitated the calls of animals. And between times he got Hourcade to take some powdered chalk thinking it was castor sugar, and an egg, taken from a setting hen, in an egg cup (the chicken was in it!).

I forget how it was that he came to jeer, in pretty strong terms too, at Henriot. Humel immediately backed him up; the battalion sergeant-major, who had

drunk rather more than was wise, let him have his say, and winked, and even went as far as to put in a word himself. The poor lieutenant was laughed at for his strategical pretensions, in a really unkind manner. I was surprised. I should have thought that he would have found grace at the hands of these fellows for whom he was always doing good turns. Oh, ah! Grace! Playoust went off on a new tack, and talked of his behaviour under fire. It was grotesque. Beat everything! He had let his platoon go hang, had chucked himself into a hole, and left the others to get along as best they could.

He raised howls of laughter, and by Jove, I joined in. There was some truth in what he said after all. Guillaumin alone protested vigorously and courageously but unfortunately he embarked upon a verbose vindication which tended to prove that true courage consists precisely in being afraid. . . .

“Listen to the staff-officer!”

He was hooted and pelted with bread pellets, and finally reduced to silence. Dessert time. The bottles went on circulating. The wine had gone to my head. I hazarded a few facile pleasantries, which were greeted with roars of laughter, which spurred my malice on to further efforts. I set myself to rival Playoust's buffoonery. He gained a momentary advantage by imitating the various phases of a pig fight. We had to go to the help of the farmeress who was choking with laughter. Then I played the ventriloquist, one of my parlour tricks. I gave a three-part scene. Our hostess again grew hysterical, and a dish was broken.

I felt occasional twinges of remorse in the midst of all this folly. All this gaiety the day after a cruel

loss! . . . But what did it matter? Had I not mourned my brother as he would have liked to be mourned? This death already seemed such an old story. . . . And lastly I privately thought that I had acquired a sort of right to give proof of a versatile disposition . . . violent and fleeting feelings, tears yesterday, and joy to-day. Was it not the prerogative of soldiers and children?

We spent several days at this farm. Every evening when we went to sleep, we expected to have to turn out and start off in the middle of the night. Henriot was eaten up with impatience, and repeated:

"It's madness not to profit by our advantage! We ought to be near Trèves by now!"

He calmed down at last. The captain had laughed at him, and reminded him of endless circumstances in military history, where prudence had dictated an identical line of conduct, which was to recover oneself before entering upon a new enterprise.

Besides that there was a complete lack of any news: not a word of the development of the action in Alsace-Lorraine. We only had the impression of a general movement of our armies towards the Belgian frontier. A big blow would be struck in the North! From time to time I amused myself by goading Guillaumin. How were we getting on over there, I wondered.

He no longer took me seriously, or else retorted:

"My dear chap, we only have to hold out for three weeks. The Russians will be coming along now!"

Again one might have thought we were at manoeuvres. The spirit of the men was extraordinary. The fight the other day, the wounded and dead—all

that was forgotten, or rather it was taken as a basis for fearing nothing from the future. They took a delight in repeating that the worst was over. Artillery, machine-guns, and rifles had all talked at the same time. The Bosches could not invent anything worse.

I have said that I was on good terms now with the *poilus* in my section, but I was not intimate with them yet. I made a few tentative advances. I asked one or two of them about their family, or their home life. They answered me politely, but did not expand. I had the feeling that I embarrassed, almost disquieted, them; so I soon stopped. There was no need to bother myself.

The most complete idleness reigned. The battalion sergeant-major no longer multiplied parades. He, Ravelli, had changed in the most extraordinary way since he had been under fire. He took no interest in anything and left his men to themselves. He may have heard—it was Breton who insinuated it—French bullets whistling past his ears!

The Lamalou-Judsi lot organised fishing parties at a pond close to the farm. No notice was taken for the first two days; on the third day they brought back a cartload of fish, having been inspired with the brilliant idea of stretching a net from one side to the other. They had cleared everything. The farmeress protested that the pond belonged to her. The captain lost his temper and threatened the beggars with Court Martial. They did not haul down their colours. Things were getting serious. Lamalou clenched his fist.

“I’ve been through the Court Martial once before now, I ’ave. I’ll tell ’em it’s a bit rough on a chap wot’s going to get knocked on the ’ead.”

I privately agreed with him. Playoust secretly encouraged him, just to see what would happen. As for Guillaumin, he took the defaulters apart, and reasoned with them. I don't know what he preached or promised, but the fact was that he appeased them. He went off to see the captain and disarmed him too. The matter went no further.

But that evening at mess he gave Playoust a bit of his mind. The latter, surrounded by his faithful satellites, answered back and had the last word.

I had kept out of it. It was my turn next morning. I found the whole lot collected round the well, disputing violently.

"What's up?" I asked.

Descroix shouted:

"Did you ever hear such a thing! This'll be the third day that the company has taken outpost duty."

No. 1 platoon had just been told that it was their turn to supply No. 2 picket. They had been congratulating themselves upon getting out of it. Hence their rage!

"Always the same lot to fork out."

Playoust headed them:

"It's disgustin' that's wot it is. There's the bally 21st there doin' nothing. Wy can't they send them?"

I ventured to remark:

"You've not been overdone so far."

I laughed.

"Outpost duty has its interesting moments."

They fell upon me, and in such a tone!

"Oh, Dreher . . . on other people's worries . . .!"

I retorted. There was a sudden torrent of bitter words, of almost injurious reproaches. Yes, yes, they had seen me at it! Then they brought up their

eternal grievances at F——. Descroix accused me of toadying to the lieutenant.

Oh! I turned on my heel. I was stupefied, sickened at this persistent animosity after our brotherly agape, the other day. What paltry minds they had!

CHAPTER XVII

DE VALPIC

I HAD not seen much of De Valpic during the last few days. Our platoons had relieved each other, and his presence always weighed on me a little like a vague remorse.

That afternoon I found him lying, with closed eyes, in the shed I had gone into, meaning to take a nap. He raised his eyelids:

“Halloa!”

I had to go up to him, and asked him:

“Not so bad the other night, was it?”

“For me it was.”

I joked.

“For you particularly?”

“Yes, I’ve got a cold already.”

He coughed.

“Pooh!” I said rather abruptly. “As long as you’ve nothing worse than that the matter with you.”

I suddenly thought of him as a soft flabby creature, this tall fellow brought up by women. I think he guessed my thoughts.

“If only I had not got such a high temperature!” he said.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"High temperature! Who said you'd got a high temperature?"

I stretched myself on the straw, without much desire to continue conversation. He seemed to be searching in his pocket. I saw a sort of metallic tube between his fingers, which he unscrewed; then holding the thing out to me, said:

"Here you are, just look at this will you?"

He explained:

"It's a mouth thermometer. I always carry it on me."

"What an idea!"

I did not know that the instrument existed in this form. The graduated glass tube only measured a few centimetres. I mechanically turned it round and round until I saw the little column of mercury shining.

"102.2°!" I exclaimed. "Is that your temperature?"

"Yes."

"You ought to take some . . . quinine."

He shook his head.

"You see . . . it's the same nearly every day."

I did not understand.

"What?"

"I'm ill," he murmured. "It's rotten, oh heavens, how rotten it is!"

I looked at him interrogatively. Turned towards me he unburdened himself of his secret, in a broken voice. It was months, years now since he had been well. Last spring his mother—"Maman" he said (the word moved me and made me dream of mine)—his mother had implored him to consult a doctor . . . He had resisted a long time afraid to hear that he was ill. . . . How alarming it had been when the

doctor, after sounding him, had knitted his eyebrows and told him he must be careful. It was not so very long since his father, a few months after a warning of this kind, had been taken from them.

While he talked I seized the opportunity of watching him unobserved. Now that my eyes were opened I immediately became aware of the well-known signs: this narrow, hollow chest, the sallow complexion, the pink patches on the cheek-bones, down to the tapering fingers.

"I realised that I could not take any risks and I wanted to live. . . . I wanted to. Two days later Mother and I took the train to Switzerland. Do you know Château d'Oex?"

I made a sign of assent.

"I stayed there for four months, April to July, resting on a long chair in the sun."

"Did you get better?"

"Much better, yes. No perspiring at night. I put on weight, and at the same time my temperature, oh! the thermometer, you know, is the surest sign of all! I had seen my father, getting so terribly feverish every afternoon! As for me, when I saw that it already rose quite easily to 101.1° , 101.3° I had not the slightest doubt about it. Well, I repeat, everything was improving. They told me that if I continued to take great care all the winter . . ."

He paused for a few seconds:

"But on the 2nd of August, you see . . . I had to leave."

"What did your mother say to it?"

He avoided that subject, but from a chance word he let slip I guessed the anguish and the resistance of his people—the sustained struggle.

"You ought to have got discharged!"

"How could I at such a moment! And then . . ."

His voice was muffled:

"Our family have always fought well!"

I silently evoked the De Valpics whose names shine in our annals: the Lord High Constable, the Admiral . . .

"I hoped it would turn out all right. At F—I managed fairly well; I kept watch, you see, with my little thermometer!"

"And now?"

"Ah, now! I've caught cold again. I was told: 'Whatever you do, don't get cold.'"

He coughed, and said very softly:

"This morning I spat some blood."

With a touching gesture he sought my hand and squeezed it.

"Dreher, I tell you all that because you've been good to me. Yes, yes, I shall never forget it. The other day you didn't let me thank you. Dreher, will you believe that . . . I'm your friend?"

Not wishing to show how much touched I was, I continued in a decided tone:

"In the state you are in, old fellow, you have no alternative but to get discharged."

He shook his head. I insisted. I pleaded the cause of reason. He had been courageous, more than courageous, heroic. That was enough. He would only aggravate the harm, by going on! And what use could he be? I pretended to be convinced—the idea was not at all a startling one at that time—that the war was drawing to a close. A few weeks more, one or two more successes, and there would be nothing astonishing in talking about peace.

I displayed real warmth. I felt a growing sympathy and admiration for him, and his superb moral energy. And he was no superhuman hero. How near to us that sign of weakness brought him—that thermometer consulted each hour on the progress of his illness!

My pleading seemed to have shaken his resolution, but his eyes were lowered.

“Dreher, tell me candidly. You’re a good soldier—what would you do in my place?”

I a good soldier! The irony of it! Was I fated to wear this halo? I who, I swear, would not have hesitated to make use of the slightest pretext for adjournment! I had to assure De Valpic that I might have acted like he had. . . . Yes, at the beginning I should have left in a burst of generosity. But, at this point I should realise the folly of persisting in it.

He was silent, and looked serious, his gaze fixed on the ground, his fingers twisting some pieces of straw.

“You must think that I set great store by my skin,” he said.

He dreaded, with the susceptibility of a proud heart, of having gone down in my estimation.

“Oh, rot!” I said. “Who doesn’t? And I bet it’s chiefly on your people’s account, your mother’s . . .”

“Poor mother! She had already bought the thank-offering which we were to take to St. Peter’s at Rome next spring.”

Oh! so they were devout believers. An old Roman Catholic family of course! It was not surprising.

“And then . . .” he continued.

He reddened.

“I was engaged to be married, when I fell ill . . . and she would not let me set her free, she was waiting for me . . .”

That was all he said. Why did this last confidence stir me more than all the rest? Why did I get up and put an end to the conversation?

“Well, my dear chap, that’s only an added reason for getting fit again. It would be stupid to make a mess of your whole future. Look here, I shall be on duty tomorrow. I’ll put you on the sick report, and you can be off back to your home, with the esteem of every one of us, and . . . my friendship.”

I went out, and wandered about round the farm for a long time. I was moved by a profound pity. I could not shake off the thought of this poor unfortunate. To have nothing left to learn about his illness, at his age, which was my age, to go in terror of death, to feel oneself being drawn towards it! . . . Then I was moved to pity for myself, for us all. Were we not all under the shadow of death, faced with tragic ends? Alas! When life was sweet and smiled on us with her store of fresh beauties. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

DARK HOURS

I HAD persuaded De Valpic to report sick. Then destiny stepped in. We started again that same night on the stroke of two o'clock. And when I went up to him during the first halt he begged me to strike his name off the list. He felt much better. He so much wanted to see the continuation, to be in at the big victory.

Guillaumin, who appeared just then, asked if we were far from the frontier.

De Valpic enlightened him. Rather not! And judging by the direction we were taking we should soon be in that part of Lorraine which had been annexed.

Good! It would have been maddening to go a long way round.

We reached Étain, where we had a warm welcome, as the Bosches had not returned in spite of their boasting. We only went straight through the town.

It was a long stage, but we did not get overtired in this mild weather. Milestone succeeded milestone. Metz: 43 km. 41, 40, 38. . . . Guillaumin was exultant:

"A mere constitutional, what?"

And Judsi:

"We'll be sleepin' in their bloomin' country, to-morrow."

Some of the men may have believed it. I thought it only right to moderate the enthusiasm.

"Oh Metz! We haven't got there yet. The siege is sure to be ghastly!"

The lieutenant who was passing, chaffed me:

"Dreher, as pessimistic as usual? He'll never believe we're getting on, until he's in Berlin."

We went into quarters at Buxy. Shortly after midnight there was an alarm. The artillery which we had not heard for some days was talking again. As old stagers we had missed the noise, it cheered us up.

But we grumbled when, having been called up and paraded in the Church Square, we were kept hanging about and freezing for an hour or more. The men "groused," and wanted to know why they couldn't be left to sleep in peace.

A lot of them wanted to "get down to it" again, and we had hard work to prevent them. A certain number sloped off in the dark. Each platoon lost a few who never turned up again.

Suddenly there was an uproar and crush at the other end of the Square. We had to spread ourselves to keep order. Playoust went to see what was up, leaving his half-section to take care of itself, with the natural consequence that it disbanded. He came back, raising his hands, with awful tales of the whole populace fleeing before the invaders! There was nothing to be done! This time the Bosches were coming in dense masses, ravaging and setting fire to everything!

A group was formed round him. The men listened

anxiously. He pulled a face. Was he rotting, or speaking the truth? We never thought of interrupting. However someone did take it upon himself. It was De Valpic, whom no one had counted on.

“That’ll do, Playoust! No tomfoolery!”

The other was quite taken aback. Guillaumin and I saw the danger, and went to the rescue, turning his tales to ridicule. He tried to back out of it. The men were reassured, and began to laugh, and our own confidence was strengthened by it too.

Yes, but what were we waiting for here? For orders, always orders! They were delayed for a good while longer, and when they did arrive, dumbfounded us! We were to fall back on Étain.

There was nothing to be done but obey, so we retraced our steps along the road we had followed so gaily the day before. Dissimulation was no longer possible. We caught up and mingled with the sad troops of fugitives. As long as the darkness lasted, we only half-realised what it meant. But what a ghastly vision of distress the daybreak brought us!

A dismal procession of women, children, and old men, many of them on foot, laden with packages and bags, or pulling and pushing wheelbarrows and hand-carts—the others huddled *pêle-mêle* in conveyances of all ages, shapes, and sizes, drawn by oxen, donkeys, and dogs. The whole populace, as Playoust had said, people hurrying along, elbowing their way, getting hung up, and delayed. Their heads were hanging, and they did not answer the stream of questions which burst from our ranks. Babies’ tears, and mothers’ sighs. Every other minute a cyclist, or a staff car cleared a way for itself, tooting and cursing. . . . And I remember an old, a very

old peasant, perched on a big tilted cart brandishing his pitch-fork and shouting to us, as he pointed in the opposite direction:

"That's where they be, you slackers!"

I was glad when, by eight o'clock, we had out-distanced the gloomy horde, by our regular pace. But a long halt on the outskirts of Étain condemned us to being caught up again by the mournful stream which flowed all day.

In the evening we set off again, and once more went through the little town. How it had changed since the day before!

Consternation reigned.

We asked:

"What's happening?"

"They are there!" was the reply.

"There!" One would have thought they meant a hundred yards away! The inhabitants were turning out. I can see a well-dressed old woman, in mourning, on the pavement in front of her house, loading a waggon—her maid was helping her—with a confused medley of furniture, ornaments, clothes.

"You needn't be in such a bloomin' hurry, Mother," shouted Judsi; "can't you see we're here!"

"You won't stop them," she retorted.

"Oh, steady on!"

She raised her voice till it became a shriek:

"You won't stop them, I tell you! It's just like it was in 1870!"

She raised her gaunt arm, her piercing voice carried well.

"Old witch!" growled Guillaumin.

We passed on, but could hear her apostrophising the platoons and companies behind us:

"You won't stop them!"

Her monotonous imprecation possessed our minds for a long time.

The night fell, but we marched on and on. What a day's march this was, too. Having had a meal we managed to hold out. We advanced without thinking and yet what extraordinary sights we came across. The enormous column of fugitives was trailing along this roadway too. This time we were going up-stream, pushing northwards from Étain.

But what were these soldiers scattered among the heart-breaking band. The moon was beginning to shine. We caught sight of uniforms, at first isolated, then in groups—all the troops mixed, and the ranks, too, apparently. . . . The strange thing was that it never occurred to us to ask what they were all doing or where they were going. . . . A few details only struck us. Why so many foot-sloggers on horseback? This problem worried Guillaumin. He sounded me several times.

"Mounted scouts, do you think?"

I answered drowsily:

"Of course!"

We advanced in silence, mechanically keeping our intervals, our columns of four. No more peasants, and only an infinitesimal number of civilians drifted down-stream now. The crowd was swelling though. Transports and teams followed each other, rolling along, slipping and sliding. They were all military-limbered waggons, forage waggons, ambulance waggons, munition waggons, a sutler's van. Battery after battery—an extraordinary state of confusion. Here were mud-crushers whipping horses, some of which

fell, there hussars on foot, dragging their worn-out beasts along.

We passed companies lying in the shade of the ditch, and envied them. There had been no halt for us for two hours at least. We had just climbed a hill; I was marching with half-closed eyes. Guillaumin nudged me:

“Heavens above!”

I opened my eyes. A large stretch of country lay before us, a dark undulating plain enamelled with monstrous glares.

I turned towards my companion.

“Villages!” he murmured.

Burning! That woke us up. We slowed down bewildered.

Bouillon said:

“Pore wretches, that’s w’y they was doin’ a bolt!”

I counted the fires. Two to the right of the road, one of which seemed quite near, and had high flames shooting up, which cast a glow all round. Three to the left, and right in front of us at the axis of our march, a huge conflagration.

Spincourt? I had heard that name.

The guns were growling sullenly. I tried to work, myself up to a generous pitch of fury. These hamlets in flame, this blood-stained earth, was my France, my Lorraine!

But I was like a disconnected electric current.

We were told to lie down in the ditch where we slept. But not for long. We were made to get up and retire a little, and lie down again—we slept once more—then we returned to our first site. We obeyed without grousing, and this time the rest was more worth having. We dozed until daybreak.

The defilade along the white road continued. How many officers and men, with horror and despair at their hearts, did we meet that August dawn? Henriot came to find us. He was tortured with suspense at last. What were all these people doing? We shook our heads, hesitating to pronounce an opinion. It all passed as in a dream. Silent, preoccupied phantoms who seemed to be hastening towards some goal. . . .

Now, however, some were to be seen whose pace was less rapid, and who did not detest being looked at—men who had been wounded, only slightly for the most part—who seemed to be saying, "We have done our bit!"

A few of us ventured to question them. Oh, what replies we got. A snare! A shambles! There were too many Huns! Each man claimed to be the only one left of his battalion or regiment.

A battalion sergeant-major, hit in the foot, gave us a graphic account. "The Bosches were coming out of a wood, our 75's loosed off a belt at them, and made pretty good shooting too. You ought to have seen the blighters dance! We were under shelter, not far off, enjoying ourselves enormously. They were blown up and fell in little pieces. Platoon after platoon cut up. Others followed them, to be met with the same fate. More still—until at the end of an hour, there was a thick rampart of dead bodies all along the edge of the wood. But new lots kept on coming up and crossing the obstacle, others shoving them on from behind. Our guns were beginning to stop talking—not enough shells. And the grey swarm slipped through into the plain. Suddenly we were threatened and attacked and overwhelmed. What could we do? Retire! We ran for our lives."

Henriot ground his teeth, and muttered:

"No, no, not that."

"You'll soon see!" said the other.

He saluted, and went on his way limping.

Other accounts were in a different key. There was often a question of a defensive taken by us. We advanced, and lay down and fired. Everything was going well, but then suddenly the hostile machine guns were unmasked. Ran, ran, ran, ran. The famous crackle went on and on, mowing our lines down like corn. No use being plucky! What could we do? (That was the everlasting refrain.) Escape! Never to return again.

Some badly wounded men appeared supported by three or four comrades who made use of the excuse to escape. There were very few orderlies and stretcher-bearers. One heard nothing but complaints, for the most part unjust, of the army medical corps. Guillaumin undertook to see a Zouave, who had just come a cropper, to the neighbouring dressing station. He came back disgusted. A major had grossly insulted him:

"Oh, go to the devil! Your pal's done for!"

A certain number, who were dragging themselves along in a sorry state, found the strength to exhort us, with a melodramatic gesture, to avenge them.

Others pitied us:

"Poor lads. You don't know what it is!"

"You think not!" retorted Bouguet. "We had a taste of it at Mangiennes!"

"Pooh!" The others snorted with contempt. "Mangiennes!" Did we think that counted!

Some gunners, black with powder, who were squatting in a cart, shook their fists at the foot-sloggers.

The latter, absolutely broken down, and drunk with rage, returned their invectives. They were just on the point of pulling out their bayonets. Our company commander, who had witnessed the scene, seized the most rabid by the collar. His tone and rank overawed them.

An old sergeant, with touches of grey on his temples, followed, holding his cap in his hand, and repeating in a singsong voice:

“Stick to your packs, lads!”

It was broad daylight now. All our *poilus* were up, taking in every detail of the show.

Will you believe that in the end not one of us was seriously demoralised. Warnings and narratives left us rather sceptical. We even felt an uncharitable tendency to rag survivors of the furnace. Their hasty gait, their burlesque accoutrements! Above all each tragic assurance: “I’m the only one left of the X—,” raised storms of laughter. We had seen dozens and hundreds of bearers of that device march past! Judsi exclaimed:

“Don’t cry about it, old chap! Your chums are waiting for you in Paris!”

I believe that at the bottom of our hearts each one of us felt naively convinced that our arrival would put everything right. . . .

The realisation that we were witnessing a rout did however penetrate my consciousness at last, though still only in a vague way. Vaguely too I dreaded lest our energy should suffer by it.

I was delighted when we got orders, about six o’clock, to leave the high road. We went across country for not more than four or five hundred yards.

Some trenches dug there appeared before us, as if by chance.

A French dirigible, the *Fleurus*, passed high above our heads, and seemed, I do not quite know why, a happy omen.

CHAPTER XIX

SPINCOURT

HEAVEN knows whether we expected to have to charge from the beginning to the end of that interminable day. The captain and the subaltern had warned us. The cannonade raged in front of us and all round us. The German fire was concentrated against a village below us, on our right. If we were occupying it, what losses it would mean to us! To begin with we could see each explosion and the resultant crumbling of the buildings. Towards mid-day a thick pall of smoke rose and shrouded everything.

The fusillade and the machine-guns joined in the concert. Who would guess what they reminded me of? The mock symphony with which Miquel had amused at the Globe Café.

It will be seen that I was far from feeling the same enervation as I had the other week. I had become a fatalist. . . . We knew all about being under fire. We had already been through it.

I should certainly have been badly bored without Guillaumin's precious and almost continual society. We began by discussing the situation at length. He maintained that it was not serious.

He passed on some of his serenity to me. His eyes shone when he said:

"And our *poilus*, what!"

"Admirable!"

He added:

"What a fine race they are!"

I wondered whether he was speaking of the French or the Beaucerons.

What should he do a little later on, but set about extolling the treasures lying dormant at the heart of these soldiers.

"Most of them are married! They nearly all have kids! They never stop thinking of those who have stayed behind—of their family. That supports them. It's a case of morale!"

"Steady on! Don't exaggerate!"

They were good fellows, the majority, I admitted, and fond of their families, but the chief point about them was their resignation and passivity. A worthy herd!

He insisted.

"I assure you that they have their own personality and feelings, and often a very generous share of them. They are certainly no phrase-makers; it is even very difficult to get them to talk. They mistrust you and themselves. You would think that they realised that they would spoil their feelings by trying to express them in their peasant jargon."

"Well?"

"Look how they find a way of writing every or almost every day! Some of the men in the platoon have asked me to write the addresses, so that they should be readable. Others, even, to wield the pen while they dictated the text. Oh, just dull commonplace formulas, but what a tender longing in them to reassure and cheer. That all declare, whatever

happens, that they are resting, far away from the Bosches, that everything is going excellently. 'Don't you worry!' is what they say. What philosophy!"

"And I'll quote some examples of delicacy; for instance, your Corporal, Donnadiou, who was hit. . . ."

I opened my mouth to tell him of the man's trick, a villainy which had remained unknown.

"Well," he continued, "I've got a man from his part of the world, from Neuville. He wrote a letter to the wife, who is just starting a new baby, to tell her that her husband had been pinked—in case he had not been able to let her know—but that it was nothing serious, and that he would keep her informed!"

Guillaumin now described the arrival of the baggage-master, in the farmyard the other day (I had missed this scene), and the distribution of the letters and cards. Some of them had wept. Others hid themselves to kiss the humble note-paper.

What a singular state of mind! I considered these men around me lying about like a lot of animals, their filthy faces, and obtuse foreheads and dull looks. Bouillon, Gaudéreaux, Judsi, did they dream? Yes. . . . Perhaps there were visions of children and wives wandering behind the brute-like masks! For the first time I was drawn to them by a brotherly instinct.

I hazarded: "And yet it must be sad to leave some one behind. . . ."

That started Guillaumin off; he was in an eloquent mood. He recognised the agonising character of these wars, which involved in the struggle, not mercenaries, as in olden days, nor even soldiers by profession, volunteers free of all ties, but the living substance of the nations, this youth incapable of breaking the chains of blood and of love at parting. For each

man in danger here, how many alarms there would be yonder in the hearts of wives and mothers! What reverberation of despair involved in each agony!

But also what consolation to feel that one was not fighting uniquely for pay or for glory, but for the safety of one's country! For what was one's country but places and people, all that one held dear? Woman above everything! Woman! All that was contained in that word! The sublime exchange of encouragement. Betrothed and wives, they all understood their rôle equally well. This cause was theirs. They had sobbed at the departure of their loved ones, but most of them had made no effort to keep them, but had only prayed Heaven to bring them back victorious.

He warmed to his subject. I listened, and approved. What a noble character he was, and what an hour in which to work upon these thoughts! The din of the battle redoubled. We caught sight of some wounded not very far away dragging themselves to the high road. Henriot signed to us. Shells were falling on a little wood less than a kilometre away from us. We were going to be engaged. I paid homage to a dear vision within me. . . .

Guillaumin cited some examples: Poor little Frémont. He had talked to him a long time, the day before Mangiennes, about Françoise, his sweet Françoise. It was to her that he offered all the privation and weariness, for her sake that he gave proof of such a confident, charming spirit. And De Valpic! Guillaumin suspected him of holding out even when ill, in the touching and feverish longing to prove his valiance to someone. . . .

He suddenly lowered his voice:

"And you, Michel . . . whom are you fighting for?"

My heart melted. How tactfully and ingeniously my friend had led round to the subject. I burned to reply to this chaste invitation by an avowal, to confess to him that for me too, toil and suffering were alleviated . . . to tell him a tale of some romance or other with this girl as heroine. Alas! I restrained myself in time. It would have been a tale indeed—to lie just at the moment when the need of candour was devouring me. Could I tell him what there was to tell? Unhappy wretch! There was nothing! What was there between her and me? Nothing. Good God, nothing! The pity of it! A holiday friendship, an exchange of post-cards, that was all. . . . It was true that for the last few days my imagination had been indulging in dangerous flights of fancy. . . . What an awakening I was preparing for myself. By what right did I think . . . that someone else was being inebriated at the same time by a twin exaltation. It would have needed a miracle and there was nothing to suggest that! Had my letter arrived? If so would she not have been astonished, and indeed shocked—not to mention the people with her—at my having written in a closed envelope? Should I ever receive a reply?

So I could do nothing but murmur in an offhand tone:

"Bah! A flirt here and there!"

I suddenly wondered whether Guillaumin had not asked me, as it often happens, solely in order to be asked himself. Did he want to open his heart to me about some secret fondness? At the sight of his ugliness I thought: "Could any one possibly love him?" But I was annoyed with myself for this reflection. . . .

"And what about you?" I said.

He smiled, without a trace of sadness or forced merriment.

"Oh, with a mug like mine! No, there's only one woman with whom I count for anything, and that's my sister. But for her sake, it would annoy me to go under!"

It was the second time that I had heard him allude to his sister. I questioned him, and he told me she was called Louise, and was twenty-five years old. They had lived together since their mother's death. She gave piano lessons.

"You'll have to get her married," I said.

He shook his head gently:

"She is as ugly . . . as I am!"

Hour after hour went by, without bringing anything worse than our inaction. We were inclined to become pessimistic. A sinister rumour spread, at one point—Ought we to believe it?—Yes, Laraque the connecting file, who had taken refuge with us for a minute, confirmed the frightful mistake. Our divisional cavalry had ventured outside our lines, and got into the line of fire from our batteries. A captain in the observation post had tried distractedly to telephone but just then the line had been cut and communications interrupted. Pandemonium. Our batteries had the troopers marked, found their range, and soon decimated them. They had been seen galloping madly in every direction, forming into bunches, and ending by flying towards the enemy's trenches, where they were met by grape-shot. The captain had gone off his head, the signaller who was responsible had been executed—not that it undid the damage!

Laraque left us. We were crushed by his recital. That was a most gloomy part of the proceedings. The big "coal-boxes" (quite recently christened) were beginning to pour down on all sides of our line raising heavy black clouds. A fusillade crackled, a little way off. Some of our companies were engaged, so they said. Our turn seemed to have come—we should bring only deadened wills to the impact. . . .

And then suddenly, just as at Mangiennes, the falling dusk took us by surprise. The call to "Cease fire" went. The extraordinary thing was that both sides appeared to obey it. The uproar suddenly decreased.

Laraque passed again bearing better news. First of all—he laughed—the horrible tale of our cavalry having been annihilated by our 75's . . . well, it had been entirely contradicted! Our guns had fired on the Uhlans all right, the plain was strewn with their bodies! Then that village, Houdelancourt, which I have described as having been battered by the German artillery ever since the morning—an officer who had come from there had given the exact total of casualties: six wounded, not one more than that! Pure waste of powder!

We hastened to pass on the good news to the men. The day ended, on the whole, on a more favourable note. Our comrades had held out, and we had not been needed. Nothing to eat? We were accustomed to that . . . the usual thing on evenings after a battle. Lamalou tasted some raw beetroot, pulled up in a neighbouring field. Everyone was convinced that we should sleep where we were. But we were to have a surprise. When it got dark, the order came to abandon the trench, and fall back on the high road.

That was a gloomy crossing. All the wounded were gathering on this side in the hope of getting first-aid. Many of them fell on the way, some dead, others exhausted, begging for a drink. There were sobs, and calls of "Mother!" We brushed past these unfortunates, strongly tempted to stop and help them, but we were forbidden to break ranks! There was growing indignation, for after all, where in thunder had our stretcher-bearers got to?

From the high road, we could see endless dots of light moving about and crossing each other in the dusk of the plain. The Bosches collecting their wounded, De Valpic informed me.

"There's organisation for you!" I said, not without bitterness.

"Their qualities against our qualities!"

CHAPTER XX

THE WAR BEGINS

WHAT was to be done with us? We were not left long in doubt. . . . With our packs on our backs, we set off.

Henriot was very much depressed. A cavalry sergeant whom he had just met had spoken to him of a general falling-back of the troops supporting us on our right. We immediately formed a salient, likely to be cut off.

But Guillaumin joined us.

"Tommyrot! Why we're just about to surround them on the left."

He had got the tip from our friend Dagomert, the motor-cyclist.

The column moved off. We marched all night.

Nobody was very clear as to what direction we were taking. We were not moving towards Étain. There was no question of a defeat. We were going of our own free will. There were regular halts, and comparatively good order was kept. Everyone was fully convinced that we were carrying out a wily manoeuvre. We were tickled, in advance, by the idea of the Bosches' surprise when they saw us appear just where they least expected us!

The long halt took place at daybreak, when coffee

was distributed. According to the lieutenant we were in the neighbourhood of Pillon and Billy, where we had fought the other week. A considerable recoil, no doubt, but we had left the enemy a long way behind.

The fact that the division was assembled on this tableland was once more the signal for troublesome attention from a Taube, which dropped some bombs, and two star shells without doing any damage.

De Valpic told me that he feared we might be obliged to fall back on the Meuse.

“What makes you think that?”

“Various things.”

He added:

“Our object is simply to delay them, I think. The north is where the game will be lost or won!”

He had a fit of coughing. Henriot appeared.

“Would you believe it! The general turned up, and hauled the colonel over the coals. He declares that we ought not to have left the trenches we were holding last night!”

“Oh, rot!”

“And that we’ve got to go back!”

“Nonsense!”

Yes. When the news got about it called forth anger, cold at first—If they didn’t know what they wanted . . . Then the men grew heated. A wave of rage, and indeed opposition, surged through them. We ourselves did not quite escape it.

Luckily, there was a diversion, in the shape of a cart which drove up. Everyone crowded round. The baggage-master! His horse was foundered. He had got mail-bags of letters and parcels which he had collected at Charny, and shouted to us:

"I've been chasing you for the last three days!"

Guillaumin took possession of our bundle, and, mounted on a heap of flints, began the distribution.

A sea of humans surrounded him, faces stretched forward feverishly, arms raised tirelessly— De Valpic in the front row between Bouillon and Humel.

I had been pushed forward. What did I expect? A line from my father when he heard the terrible news? Hm! He would hardly have got mine. No. I expected nothing. One by one the names escaped: Gaudéreaux, Descroix, Lieutenant Henriot. Comrades answered to a certain number of them.

"Missing! Killed!"

Brief words which froze.

I suddenly felt as if I'd had a blow on the head.

"Dreher!" shouted Guillaumin, looking round for me.

Lamalou handed me a letter. My eyes dimmed, my head swam. That writing . . . I freed myself from the crush round me. I fled, half demented. I pinched, and weighed the envelope. How light and yet how heavy it was! I just missed charging into the captain who was also hanging about waiting. . . . I went twenty, fifty, yards, then threw myself down in a field, at the foot of an apple-tree.

My heart was still beating a mad measure, and I could hardly get my breath. I hesitated for a long time before tearing the thin envelope, then slowly and cautiously pulled out the double sheet which I fingered and turned over. . . . That stamp too . . . Yes, yes, I knew it! But I was impatient to revel in the happy certainty: I flew to the signature.

Jeannine! Jeannine! I shouted the name aloud in a transport of delight. Then I hurriedly glanced

through the first page. . . . And instantly I understood that Happiness was descending upon me. . . .

As if afraid of so much joy, I hid myself, so to speak, from my ecstasy for a few seconds behind such reflections as: "The post hasn't lost much time!" or "That's what you might call a real letter!" As lovers at their meetings cloak the emotion of the first moments with trivial remarks.

Eight pages! She had written eight pages! I began to read them with tender deliberation. One long, dear harmonious poem! Each line held a joy in store for me; at each page I turned I was torn betwixt my regret at seeing it finished and my rapture that the next was beginning. I could repeat those sentences today without hesitating over a single syllable.

She was writing, she said, on the evening of August 16th. She had just received my letter, and was answering it immediately. She wanted to be the first to send me a word of consolation in my sorrow. My sorrow? I did not quite understand. It seemed to me that there was no reason now for anything but envy. Then I reddened. Had I not told her of my brother's death, on that card? Ah yes, whether consciously or unconsciously, I had calculated on arousing her pity, her tenderness, and I had succeeded. She professed herself overcome with emotion. My only brother! Why—she reproached me gently—had I spoken of him so rarely? She could see from the tone of my letter how much I loved him. It was natural—the only being in the world fashioned after my likeness, hardly any older than myself, the playmate of my childhood, the confidant of my adolescence. The same profound and simple reasons which my rejuvenated heart had suggested to me. I held Victor

more dear, I regretted him more poignantly. I blessed Jeannine for having guessed my brotherly affection. In my card, I had made some passing allusion to the two little orphans. Here again her thoughts ran hand-in-hand with mine; she tactfully confirmed me in the idea of my duties.

Oh! with what sublime trust, with what exquisite and ingenuous sympathy these lines overflowed. This language, so new between us, seemed to me usual and necessary. Jeannine made some reference to the footing we had been on at Ballaigues, when the tone of our trifling had merely been one of playful courtesy. She appeared to apologise for the disguise adopted then. Now we might see each other face to face. She professed her friendship for me. She did not hesitate to make use of that word, so delicious and pure, in which I read another, essentially the same, but more magnificent illuminating the entire universe!

I had not a shadow of doubt; she cannot have had either. It was the letter of a fiancée. What surprised me was that we had delayed so long, before seeing into our hearts. Ever since my departure, and every day more surely, was not the vision of this child the only one which at the approach of danger consoled me with a hope, towards whom, in the hour of safety, my mirth rose up like incense. This hearth had ceased long since to smoulder under cinders; powerful and generous, it flung its ardent flames towards the sky. And had I doubted, Jeannine, lest my passion should not be reciprocated. Could I not summon up a certain look of yours, or an inflection of your voice which already bore witness to the chaste avowal. How fervently your fingers had lingered in mine at

parting. We had been consecrated to each other ever since that time. The present was less surprising—child of the wondrous past! I seemed already to have spelt out these pages, upon which I was feasting, in the course of some dream. Their enchantment, as adored memories, was doubled for me! . . .

The end of the missive breathed a tenderness no less proud or strong. Jeannine knew through the *communiqués*, of the brilliant affair at Mangiennes. She guessed that I had taken part in it, that I was not wounded—(No! My good fortune lent me too great a halo!)

By some mysterious intuition she ended up by counselling me to bear the ill-fortune, which might be near at hand, courageously. What did she know of it? What presentiment had she? I caught a glimpse of the fate of returning troops, the ruin of our first hopes. Still distant hypotheses! And then it would have needed greater misfortunes than that to damp me. I was filled with enthusiasm. Guillaumin had not lied. What rapture to consecrate myself to thee, to thy defence, my noble France, incarnate in a young face! . . .

I turned my steps towards my section; I was coming down to earth, returning to grim reality. . . .

What a sight met my eyes!

The piles of arms had been broken everywhere; yonder, the neighbouring battalion was dispersing in the greatest disorder; our lot, disbanded too, were jostling each other on the road. A regular panic! Guillaumin, bareheaded, and haggard . . .

"I was looking for you!" he shouted. "What do you say to this?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"They're firing on us!"

"Who?"

Dragging me along, he gasped:

"I've got your rifle and your things. Come along. Come along!"

We rushed down.

"Do you hear?"

The echoes of explosions.

"The 'Taube'?"

"That was the beggar that marked us! But . . . they talked of our going back . . . I don't think! They're close on our heels . . . ! Their artillery, the 'coal boxes'!"

He pinched my arm till it bled:

"And we've been flying all night!"

I buckled on my pack, in a dazed way as we ran along, and took my rifle from his. Henriot caught us up:

"They're coming up from the south too. We're surrounded!"

He was choking.

Playoust stopped in front of us and chucked down his pack exclaiming:

"Wot's the use o' goin' on? We're goners!"

Some of the men followed his example.

"You thundering lunatic!" I shouted to him.

Guillaumin shook his fist at him. I shouted:

"Keep your rifles, lads! The war's beginning in earnest now, when you've got to fight for your crops and homes, for everything that's dear to you!"

Two or three men who had dropped their arms picked them up. We reached a cross-road.

Our *poilus* were grouped round us.

"Fall in, No. 3 section."

"Nicely in the soup, we are!" someone exclaimed.

"Possibly! But we'll get out of it somehow. Where there's a will, there's a way!"

They looked at each other blankly. Then Judsi smacked the barrel of his rifle with a swagger.

"So the blighters think they're going to give us a doin'? We'll show 'em wot's wot!"

I could have hugged him!

PART III

BOOK VII

August 25th-September 2nd

CHAPTER I

IN RETREAT

WHAT memories I have of those days of retreat and disaster. Days when not only Victory, but Hope, also, hid her face! Chance and destiny and logic were so many forces crushing us. Everything was giving way. We suffered in every kind of way, from hunger, cold, heat, exhaustion, moral anguish, lack of news. Virile busy days, when the plan of salvation germinated in the brain of our leaders, when the work of redemption was accomplished in silence in the heart of each man and the nation at large. Days, I should weep not to have spent where I ought, as I ought! . . .

That afternoon, first of all, which we spent wandering in a forest. Surrounded? We were not far from it. The men were well aware of the sentries posted everywhere, and the patrol parties sent out to investigate in every direction.

One scene stands out particularly clearly in my memory. Those staff-officers we passed as I was going with my section to inspect a certain issue. The

general seated on the edge of a slope with his head between his hands, his subordinates standing motionless a few steps away, respecting his meditation. A little farther on were the orderlies, holding their horses by their halters. An hour later as we were returning, we found them at the same place, and in the same attitudes, the general with his head still sunk in his hands, his aides-de-camp silently fixing their eyes on him.

A petrified tableau. So all these people expected nothing better than to have to give up their swords. I thought we were done for, but forced myself to distract the attention of my companions.

We afterwards learnt that during the twenty-four hours there, we had, in high places, been looked upon as taken, and coldly struck off the lists. We owed our escape solely to a company sergeant-major, a native of that part of the country, who, having made careful inquiries about the limits of the hostile advance, went, that evening, to find the general in charge of the division, and offered himself as guide.

It was our last chance. We followed him. The march lasted for three hours. Only a small number of us discerned the tragic element floating about us. The men complained of the absence of halts. The strictest silence had been imposed upon us, we even had to hold the sheaths of our bayonets in our hands. At the most dangerous point some palavering in undertones, and obstreperous horse-play went on, a practical joke. The Bosches no doubt were tired out; their sentries dead tired! A few shots cracked on our flanks. We reached Cremilly. That apparently meant that we were saved.

For one day!

That was only the mild beginning of our trials. After a morning's rest we started again, with a charitable warning that we should have to keep at it until nightfall. We had to keep at it all night too, and the next day. . . . A forced march of thirty hours, the stiffest in the campaign! I may mention further that we had not slept or had a bite of food since two days before. . . . A miracle of human endurance.

As long as it was light I vaguely noticed the road we covered. The noise of the firing was growing weaker. We were falling back on the Meuse, as De Valpic had predicted.

Back there already! I lamented so much lost territory. This thought pained me. I looked with the aching heart with which one salutes abandoned patrimony, at these fields and valleys, these woods, which I examined with such a cold and detached gaze a few weeks ago. Lorraine was actually becoming dear to me! I began to realise that each part of the world has its own particular character. . . . The tender green of these pastures which not even the ardour of a torrid summer had been able to alter! The calm and haughty harmony of this billowing ground . . . I was seized with affection for this pensive and laborious race by whose property the whole of the French lineage is enriched. The names recurred to me of authors born in these parts, who wove their noble blossoms for our literary crown, of painters who had grown up and erected their easels here, attracted by the enchantment of the mist. And all that belonged there of our history: Varennes, the flight of Louis XVI., the romantic episode on the threshold of a troubled and magnificent epopee! . . . Valmy, Sedan close at hand! We were, as I

have said, drawing near to the Meuse. Fifteen or twenty miles up-stream lay Domrémy and Vaucouleurs. Were these hamlets full of sacred memories destined to crumble within a few days beneath the Teuton howitzers?

And if we had to retreat still farther! My gaze took in the hills, and the expanse of pale sky. Fortin's brutal warning recurred to my mind. "What they needed first was what remained to us of Lorraine, Champagne, and the Franche-Comté . . ."

My heart contracted. I murmured, "No, no!"

Hours and hours passed by. The evening fell. There were no halts, or almost none. The night came down. We went on mechanically, hour after hour, bowed beneath our packs. No one stayed behind. Guillaumin had spread the report that the Uhlans, pushing on behind us, butchered all the stragglers—a superfluous intimidation. After three weeks of active service, those who had already fallen out eliminated, these classes of reserves contained nothing but unusually good soldiers . . . no more sentiment or thought . . . admirable beasts of burden. Shall I say that we slept standing up? But I mean it quite literally. Many of them I swear were snoring. Every other minute one got one's neighbour's rifle in the shoulder or in the face: not that it woke one up for very long. It was astonishing that there were no serious accidents. Had we crossed the Meuse? Were we continuing to skirt it? Guillaumin was talking in his sleep. At one point he said to me:

"We're going through Verdun, you see?"

I raised my heavy eyes and said:

"Are you sure?"

He made a movement with his head:

"Look at these two-storied houses."

They were the trees bordering the road. I had not even the strength to smile. At dawn an artillery officer galloped along the column. He slowed down on a level with us and asked:

"Have you seen him? My orderly! He must have fallen off his horse on to the road."

The men nudged and questioned each other. Nobody, no. Nobody had seen anything. We learnt, ten minutes later, that the man had just been picked up gasping and on the point of death, a kilometre behind us. The whole regiment had gone over his body without noticing it.

Farther on—the longing to sleep had left me since it had grown light again—I witnessed a touching scene.

Henriot looked me up and whispered:

"I say, we shall pass my home!"

I was interested.

"At Génicourt?"

"Yes, the village after this one."

We had just entered Dieu. The lieutenant stayed beside me. When, on leaving the village, he saw that we were turning to the right, his face clouded over:

"What in the world are we going to do over there!"

We were crossing the river; we should leave Génicourt on the left!

"Do you think, do you think," he said, "that I might ask the captain . . .?"

Ask what? For permission to go and kiss his mother.

"Of course!" I said.

I never dreamt that it would be refused.

He left me, but soon came back:

"The captain didn't want me to. He's quite right. Quite right!"

But the most terrible misery was depicted on his face. He continued:

"And do you know. He assures me that it would have been no good, that the village must be evacuated because . . . because it's on . . . the right bank!"

He stopped at the side of the road.

"Oh! Dreher! I should never have thought that they would have left it, that they would . . ."

Génécourt, his birthplace, devoted to ruin, to the worst ravages, to the fate of those wretched villages whose funeral pyres had blazed like beacons on the horizon, yesterday.

"Come along, sir."

He followed me like a child, adding:

"You, you understand, don't you? You who are a Lorrain too. The captain told me that over there in your direction, towards Lunéville, we have had to retire too, and let them penetrate into our territory. . . ."

It was a striking coincidence—that fact that he told me. I had had a presentiment of it. All night I had confusedly turned this apprehension over in my mind. Eberménil. Eberménil.

How often had I not repeated to myself that I felt no particular attachment to this hamlet where chance, and chance alone, had decreed that I was to be born! I had not set foot in it since I was ten years old. We only kept the estate out of affection for the past. Why did I suddenly have a strikingly clear vision of the white house with green shutters, the big fir beneath whose shade the table was often laid? I called to mind other scenes. The little pond where we always

tried to catch the gold fish—I had fallen in twice—the nursery where we fought with Euréka pistols, the croquet lawn, where mother used to play with me against father and Victor—Victor! Mother! O dear shades! Yonder lay my childhood dead, with the vanished beings. This part of the world was for me a unique centre of emotions. I made a vow to go back there and soak myself with its melancholy and charm. But a cloud intervened. What if the old place had been sacked? Perhaps the old fir-tree had fallen! Revolted at the thought, I felt the shock of an individual rancour. My heart contracted. We should see!

CHAPTER II

DARK DAYS

THAT march without halt or respite had led us to the neighbourhood of St. Mihiel. There was some talk of our being told off for the active defence of Toul. But the next day found us reascending toward the north-east. All the same ground to cover again. We made the best of a bad job.

We passed close to Génicourt for the second time. Henriot made no more requests, but his gaze lingered sadly on those roofs separated from us by the river; and from that day a secret spring seemed to have snapped in him.

After another hard day's march we again reached the Meuse which we had left behind the day before, in order to cut south of Verdun.

The river was not very broad at this point, only twenty yards or so, nor very deep, and there were numerous fords. The night was falling. The liquid sheet seemed heavier and darker than usual. Guillaumin who was the first to go down to the bank shouted to me:

"I say, the water's red!"

I was loath to believe it; and yet . . . I joined him and plunged my hand into it, and then drew it out. These dark stains—must be a bloody deposit! How horrible! I hurriedly wiped my hand on the

grass. The rushes washed by the current were soiled in a like manner. Those shapeless masses floating below the surface, if one looked hard, turned out to be corpses!

Had there been fighting on these banks? No, upstream, we learnt. Furious attempts on the part of the Germans to force this important piece of line. They had sustained terrible losses. Their bodies, we were told, obstructed the course of the river; it could be crossed dry-shod.

We stayed there that night and the next morning—a repulsive halting place. An acrid odour rose from this charnel stream.

We luckily had a tale of victory to lull us to sleep: the enemy shattering themselves against the obstacle; artillerymen filing off mad with joy caressing their guns. One of their captains boasted that he had demolished more than six thousand Bosches with his four batteries. How could we question such feats of prowess while a never-ending stream of human relics floated past on the stream at our feet? The best proof of our success arrived in the shape of an order to recross the Meuse and advance again.

A few miles recovered! I greeted with a friendly glance the lovely hills and valleys that saw us again so soon, as victors.

We entered a village named Hazaumont, which the Teuton flood had submerged barely for an instant; and stayed there all day. We had to be on the alert as the guns were thundering in the neighbourhood, but it was a rest for mind and body nevertheless.

The few inhabitants who had stayed behind exploited the situation. I still laugh when I think of

the old woman who was selling her bad wine at four francs a bottle.

Judsi, when he learnt the price, gaped with astonishment, opened his hands, and dropped two bottles which he had seized. There was a resounding crash! And he retired, politely saying:

“Too dear, madam!”

The old woman uttered piercing shrieks and lodged a complaint. A lot of good it did her. The captain requisitioned the entire contents of her cellar, at tenpence a bottle, indiscriminately!

We might once more have been at manoeuvres. We ate and drank, and got a good afternoon's nap; what could we wish for more! One of Guillaumin's corporals found a way of hiring himself out to give a hand to the publican in the village. He had his work cut out for him, dashing out from the tap-room to the tables in the garden, but he was richly rewarded for his pains, in the evening, by the great pailful of wine which he brought back in triumph.

He was hailed with delight. There were some abuses, of course. Lamalou was heard to ask:

“Any one got an empty haversack?”

He disappeared and came back with a rabbit, and a chicken.

The Bosches had not pillaged much, only a few houses. I won't swear to it that certain others did not suffer by our doing. There were complaints by the mayor, and an inquiry; they spoke of a thief caught in the act.

The officers in command, on the contrary, closed their eyes to the orgies and drinking parties. Discipline was relaxed, in fact. I was a little disquieted about it, in spite of the fact that, in our lot at all

events, the men kept within certain limits. It is certain that they were feverishly anxious and eager to make the most of all the material benefits, which they might not enjoy for very much longer. And surely the thought that a lot of these fine lads would be under the ground tomorrow was a good enough excuse.

The place stank of spies. During our short stay, several were discovered, and had summary justice dealt out to them, which gave rise to a tendency to see them everywhere. Every civilian fell under suspicion; there were repeated disputes between soldiers and villagers—ill usage and reprisals. We will draw a veil over it! It was sickening!

As to the general situation, the large majority never gave it a thought, and we others still knew nothing.

General Pau was supposed to be striking a knock-down blow in Belgium while Castelnau on the other wing was pushing on the invasion of Alsace. A superb enveloping movement! All that our army group in the centre, which served as a pivot, had to do, was to hold out, to avoid being broken through. This slight retirement, on our part, had been of small importance.

But matters were to be precipitated.

The same evening we leave Béthain to march northwards towards the firing. We do not get very far. The moment our advance companies enter a village, a hail of "Black Marias" begins—there are heavy losses—we retire in disorder—an accomplice in the steeple is signalling to the enemy. We have orders to shoot him; he escapes. A deadly halt in a field.

And suddenly on the road close by a hullabaloo, a rout. That stream of fugitives, runaways, and wounded. We know all about that! Spincourt over

again! An infallible sign of defeat! Surprise and bitterness—once more!

Some battalions marched past in comparatively good order, troops from the south, who had fought as well as any of the others, but their accents and black beards tickled our sense of humour, and a stupid tale got about that they gave way without fighting.

Terrible tidings were passed along, spread by the captain, a native of Tarascon, I imagine, who ran up to one of our officers:

“Where are you going?”

“To occupy that village.”

“Impossible, my dear fellow!”

“How’s that?”

“We’ve just come from there! It’s raining bommbbs!”

Our halt lasts an eternity. The firing is drawing nearer. A moonless night. We hate the feeling of passing on to the front, without having heard ourselves shout to any one, to get out of the way—one of the rare occasions when one wishes instinctively to retire. Not far behind us, we felt, was the Meuse. Yes, there we could make a stand!

The village we entered a few hours ago is on fire. The stream on the road is becoming less dense. The report once more spreads that we are cut off, or at all events forgotten, it appears.

Or sacrificed? The colonel warns us that our division has orders to protect the retreat, to hold out to the last extremity. That revives our courage! But I consider. A division to form a rear-guard? How many corps were there crowded there!

They at last decided to take us back. The wan dawn—the “coal-boxes” beginning again. At one

point their crash passes so low above our heads that we should like to bend right down to the ground. We are surrounded on all sides by the terrible detonations. A hundred yards from us a platoon of the 23rd battalion is pounded to pieces—an abominable sight! We have the strength to make our way . . . But the lowlands and ditches and woods are running over with wounded; and men who have come to the end of their strength succumbing to over-work and hunger. Mounted police scour the roads, in increasing numbers, and beat the bushes, shaking men by the collars who seem to be asleep, but sometimes turn out to be dead.

Our instructions were explicit. By midday not one of our men was to be on the right bank of the Meuse.

At this point my recollections of places and dates become rather involved. Three, four days . . . What happened? We march and march, and we fight. But there are no long engagements.

We expect to hold each prepared and organised position. No! we are turned and overwhelmed. We have to break up, pursued by hostile projectiles. And what a nightmare the Taubes are. They harry you hour after hour, dropping grenades and bombs, and also messages which we have neither the time nor the inclination to read. Incredibly daring pilots descend to within fifty yards! We fire on them in a fury, with "Archibalds" and rifles and revolvers. All in vain! Nothing touches them. The bird flies off . . . I've seen some of the lads exasperated to such a pitch that they began to throw stones.

The life of the Meuse? Far from it! We could not

hold it for an hour. The Germans had just crossed it at Consenvoye and elsewhere.

An insane circuit began. Souilly, Montfaucon, Exermont, Tailly—I won't be answerable for the order in which they came.

The most striking episode occurred at Beauclair.

Some Uhlans were said to be resting in the village. We were ordered to chase them out of it. For once in a way our artillery prepared the way for us, by peppering it for a good hour. Then a whistle was blown—we were hanging about on the outskirts—"Fix bayonets! Charge!"

We rushed the village, marvelling, in spite of the preparation, at such an easy success. Then we saw that the enemy had been warned and had evacuated it just before the bombardment had begun. The horrible part was that we had destroyed this village for nothing, nothing at all. Not a house was left standing, not a strip of wall spared. Some of the inhabitants, some women, came out of the smoking remains. They had taken refuge in the cellars during the devastating cyclone,—many of them had been killed there. Mad with rancour, among the ruins, they hurled taunts at us:

"Ah. It's you! It's your work, is it! Even the Bosches are better than you!"

That evening, we retired again after severe fighting. A night march, in zigzag formation, and in the morning bewilderment. We had retired too quickly, it seemed, leaving all our artillery unsupported, and in the greatest danger.

We ourselves were surrounded, so it was said. This time it was really serious! We were assured that the situation was as desperate as it could be.

Our colonel, the one like Dumeny, had got a splinter in his thigh. The new one collected his officers and pointed out that no choice was left but to surrender or perish. His had been made he added, tapping his revolver. (Henriot was my authority for these details.) Someone or other, he said, had gone as far as to suggest cutting up the colours to prevent them being left in the hands of the enemy. Each N. C. O. and each private should carry away a shred.

They had got as far as that! And then a young staff-captain dropped into the middle of them shouting;

“For Heaven’s sake, sir, send someone to relieve the guns!”

He energetically took the direction of the operations into his own hands. A certain battalion was to play a certain part! Such-and-such a company as flankers. And there was not a minute to be lost!

He was a born leader! We would have followed him wherever he chose.

Our counter-attack was successful, and enabled the gunners to bring their batteries and ammunition waggons back.

There was talk, the same day, of an extensive advantage obtained in our neighbourhood. We triumphantly thought we had done with these retrograde marches.

No such luck! At night, orders came as usual to beat a retreat. We were entering on another stage of our fantastic itinerary. A flight—as we were being pursued. The hamlets of Argonne again burst into flame behind us. One evening twelve torches could be counted blazing beneath the lowering sky. . . .

Astounding rumours began to spread. The most persistent, but also the one which found the least credence, was this:

“Laon and La Fère invested!”

CHAPTER III

STRENGTH OF MIND

WOULD it be a surprise to hear that not for one instant during that time did I experience the faintest shadow of discouragement? And yet I did not shut my eyes to the truth. I did not in the least disregard the desperately critical element in our position. My steadfastness arose, I believe, from the deep-rooted conviction that if, in such circumstances, the nation abandoned the least iota of her self-confidence, all would be up with her and with us. I was conscious of being a molecule participating in the whole. The slightest faltering on my part would have diminished the strength of my platoon, of my company, of the whole regiment. In the same way, I thought, my energy must raise it and reinforce it. And besides, my will did not need stiffening, I was steeped in serene faith, infinitely more convinced of our final success, all through this retreat, which resembled a disaster, than I had been a few days before, when I kept watch at the outposts of a victorious army. "Just wait a little," I repeated to myself obstinately. Our adversary was gaining an advantage, driving us in front of him. Very well! We were suffering, and we should suffer endless ills,—especially when autumn came on,—desertions, partial mutinies might occur. Everyone counted on some terrible epidemic. There would be

nothing surprising in new and still more serious defeats. Yes, but afterwards, afterwards? Afterwards, I conceived a limit to our misfortunes, but not to our resources. I discerned in myself, in us, a capacity for resistance against which the effort of the enemy would spend itself in vain however tenacious it might be.

To what must I attribute the expansion of my strength of mind? I asked myself then, and have considered it since.

To the boon, first of all, of being descended from that sturdy stock. I remembered the vitality my mother had always shown. Had she not nursed me at night during my long illnesses for three weeks at a time, without neglecting one of her duties during the day? And my father, and his behaviour from one end to the other of the preceding war! Taken prisoner once, wounded twice, he considered the armistice shamefully premature after six months of incessant fighting.

On searching my memory, I did not fail to find indication of the force latent in me, which had had no opportunity of increasing owing to the paltry conditions of my life as a young well-to-do *bourgeois*. That Rugby semi-final for the inter-school championship, played between my college and the "Lilies of the Valley" from Bourdeaux. Our opponents, favoured by the wind and sun, had kept the game in our "twenty-five" nearly all the first half, and had scored four tries and two goals. That meant a beating for us; despair in our team. I can see myself at half-time, ceasing to suck my lemon in order to make a manly speech to my fourteen comrades. In the second half, we kicked off, got the play into their "twenty-five," and in our turn, scored two tries, the second of which was converted.

We could not have gained more satisfaction by beating them, than we did by avoiding a humiliating defeat.

Does the comparison make you smile?

But I belonged to a generation which had already profited by the proud lesson of sport. I had pursued all the most violent athletics, less on rational than on passionate grounds, and for the delights of self-love which bear such a wonderful attraction for youthful hearts. I had run, boxed, and swum. I had been broken into the games where the individual learns to collaborate unselfishly with his partners. I bear witness to the nobility of that school. Without suspecting it I had gained a moral education there. One comes out tempered for any struggle, after having tried conclusions with rival energies over and over again in friendly meetings.

And even if I had gained nothing but the bodily benefit!

The play of my muscles and organs was free and healthy and unhampered. Well fed as we were, except on one or two occasions, I could have gone to the world's end. As I became hardened, I no longer got as tired as I had on the first days. I lay down to sleep, never mind where, and I slept. On waking up all I felt was a suspicion of stiffness, nothing more. The first advance! How often I was lucky enough to be able to give a helping hand to some man, by carrying his rifle or his load for him for an hour or two. My own pack sat lightly on me, seemed to have become part of me. I remember how distracted I was one day—I must have left it on the bank just now, I exclaimed, during the long halt. . . !

Guillaumin saw that I was not laughing, it was he

who exploded: My pack? It had been plastered on to my shoulders the whole blessed time!

Another motive for my strength of mind, the chief one, was my correspondence.

There were many complaints during those weeks, about the delay in the postal service. With us—I can only state the fact—it worked adequately, no, admirably. I have described how the baggage-master caught us up, the day after "Spincourt." By some knack, or lucky chance, we saw him arrive twice more during the week, trotting cheerily along behind his lean mare. He was a good sort, and related his adventures, which others might have called feats of prowess. How many times had he just missed being killed, wounded, or taken prisoner! These were reliable accounts: his cart had been riddled, and the splinter of a shell had pulverised one of his post-bags one day. Neither he nor his beast had ever been touched.

The second mail brought me a letter from my father. He knew at last; he had had official information. It was a grave and sorrowful missive. His affection and hope were centred entirely upon me, he assured me. In his manlike way of expressing himself, where there was not one unnecessary word, I discovered traces of an attachment which I had formerly refused to recognise.

And this added page—was from the poor little widow. After leaving St. Mihiel, which was threatened, she reached Paris just in time to be greeted by the abominable news. She was bearing up in the face of the terrible shock. I had dreaded collapse and prostration for her. And now no one could help admiring her, shining with resolute determination in

her affliction—two little children to bring up—the sense of her duties! How I should have liked to go to her and take her hands and say: “I mourn with you, my sister. If I live, dispose of me as you will!”

What a transport of delight I was thrown into by these appearances of the baggage-master. Jeannine, with divine consideration, had written to me again without waiting for my reply, which might be delayed, she said, by so many chances. In future she intended to write me a line almost every day. A line! That meant long, affectionate epistles. Two reached me at once, then three together, the second time.

With a modesty to which I mutely paid homage, Jeannine avoided all allusions to the new state of affairs which had actually risen between us. But I read her passionate infatuation between the lines, in the burning contents of these letters. Scraps of them still float in my memory. She spoke of herself and of me, of my people and her people—our people. She touched lightly upon every subject, which at that time affected us like so many millions of our brothers. Did she not recall as if by chance various of those high problems which had formed the subject of our smiling discussions at Ballaigues—self-sacrifice, abnegation, disinterested attachment to such and such an idea or being? Did I deign now to bow before this sublime foolishness, she wondered? She did not insist upon it. She knew that she had easily carried her point. I developed our motives of inspiration, and returned them to her. They were all secretly contained—and she felt it, the sweet creature—in this one, we loved each other.

Love! I dared to look this prodigious word in the

face. The vision of promised joy kept me up. When once the war was over, the country saved,—in her eyes and in mine, everything else must give way to that—I pictured our reunion, our brief betrothal, and the day, oh God, the day when we should kneel side by side—What could it matter whatever separated me from that time? Toil and suffering, the spilling of my blood, what was it all? A moderate advance when such wondrous radiance filled the horizon.

I had not given up my habit of analysis. An attitude of mind which stays with one, I believe, till death, when once adopted. I sometimes wondered at my youthful enthusiasm. Was I a captive? Caught up in the whirlwind? I who had thought myself safely in shelter. I asked myself whether this ardour were not partially fictitious or at all events ephemeral? How unlike me it was—I, who was so much imbued with the idea of my cold-bloodedness and stoicism—to become infatuated about this child, and that too when I was no longer in her presence, when I had been able to live beside her for weeks without being in the least perturbed or inflamed. Such reflections drew me as the bushes on the river-bank draw an abandoned boat drifting with the current. It was only a brief fluctuation. I gave one or two powerful strokes with the oars, and regained the open river, where the rapid stream carried me away.

It was true, I admitted, that a month or two ago, when I had been face to face with her, I was incapable of love, or of any exalted feelings. But was I alive at that time? No. No. A secret affliction robbed my destiny of all true zest. Let me revel today in the supreme instinct which was reviving in me! Was this instinct folly? It was quite possible. Especially this

passion which had suddenly blossomed in such abnormal circumstances? But what was there more beautiful than a beautiful folly? If, after having been hurled, by the brutality of circumstances, from my quietude into the sphere where the fate of primitive beings was under discussion—what more natural than that I should be born anew to their fire and rapture. What delight there was in recurring to an artless frame of mind, what pride at the same time in retaining a certain elevation of thought. Love could no longer mean for me mere desire. I magnificently mingled metaphysical reveries with it. I flattered myself on having attained perfect poise—on being philosopher enough to give my fever an august flavour—man enough to quiver at it.

In my replies to Jeannine I was as reserved as she was as regarded our deepest feelings. Like her I poured myself out in passionate meditations on the present circumstances. Any treatment seemed to suit them, from arch frivolity to lyricism. I, who formerly used to be so particular about each letter being written in an accurate, and indeed elegant style, now scribbled away at page after page, just as they occurred to me. I did not even read them over! A soldier to his fiancée! The slips must take care of themselves. And I took a kind of pride in baring my soul, which no longer hid any evil recesses. . . .

CHAPTER IV,

OH, MY FRIENDS!

IN whom should I confide the secret which made my heart leap?

Could I hesitate when Guillaumin was beside me! Lively, hearty, and full of go, he was an incomparable companion. He fought as if he had been born to it. . . . He was in for it, and would stick to it. He had thought it would only be a short business. He realised that it would be a long one. Couldn't be helped! Why grouse about it? He preferred to save his breath. Not for an instant did he dream that we could negotiate for peace as losers. One felt that he would march on patiently counting always on revenge, sooner or later, as long as he had the legs to march on; that he would fight as long as he had the arms to fight with.

How fond I was of him! How worthy he was of my confidence!

I hesitated, all the same, for a long time. It was the effect of my rooted suspicion of my fellow-beings—I swear that I lacked the courage. One day, however, when we were marching—he was talking to me about his sister who was a musician—I made some allusion to Jeannine, also a musician. He looked at me, and I made up my mind to it, I so much wanted him to know. But my tone played me false in the most

bizarre manner, cloaking itself in false irony. I seemed to be giving an account of a casual flirtation. What would this unimportant intrigue end in? I pretended to have no idea of it. And the word, the delicious word, which was ready to blossom on my lips, was never pronounced.

Hypocritical trifling! How I cursed it, on looking back at it. How thankful I was to Claude for not adopting the same frivolous tone in his turn. If he had done so, that would have been the end of it. I should have retired within myself, embittered by the idea that I had been misunderstood or, worse still, we should have continued to make meaningless remarks on the subject, which would have done violence to my love. Instead of which Guillaumin guessed that I was, in spite of myself, the victim of an absurd timidity; it was he who, by insensible degrees directed our conversation into a more cordial and sincere channel. He made his interest clear to me. My confidence touched him, he refused to treat it as an insignificant sentiment. Then I took the final step, and knew the sweetness of self-abandonment.

Without a blush, since I was sure that no chaffing threatened me, I was able to describe to him in detail the progress of the sweet seduction right up to the glorious ecstasy. He listened to me unwearyingly, encouraging me by a strange word or nod. The next day he gave me an opening, which I had vaguely desired, to return to my subject. He smiled at me, when my next letters came, and his eyes shone. His friendship performed the miracle of making him happy because I was.

De Valpic had stayed with us. I had pressed him

in vain to report sick. Guillaumin, and the captain too had urged him to. Circumstances robbed our exhortation of all efficacy. He said repeatedly that it was a time when the country claimed the determined effort of all her sons. If I insisted, he cut me short with:

“Dreher, you wouldn’t desert us! . . .”

So he went on, and refused to give in. He valiantly accomplished the terrible marches, and bore the sleepless nights, and the days without rest. We sometimes found him sitting down panting, during the halts, without even the strength to wipe his forehead. His appearance then would terrify us, his hollow eyes, and flaming cheek-bones. In a few days his features had become peaked, his face emaciated; his poor shoulders were bowed. One would never have expected him to go down hill so rapidly. His cough was growing more rasping. He expectorated freely, but always—with touching consideration—into a little spittoon, concealed until then in his pack. We hardly dared to ask him how he was. He had asked me lightly not to refer to the subject again.

“I am better, I assure you, since I’ve given up thinking about it!”

“But what about your temperature?”

“I’m not feverish now. I’ve thrown away my thermometer. I ought to have begun by doing that!”

He did not let a day go by without writing, any more than I did. He was always on the lookout for ways of despatching his letters, and was usually obliging enough to allow me to profit by them.

I was totally ignorant of anything concerning the object of his love, her name and age and everything.

The one question he had pronounced had been enough to make me understand his devotion for her. She too, I guessed, must love him, if she was willing to wait till he recovered.

I used to wonder about this girl—a stranger to me. I imagined her as the bearer of a great name, endowed with beauty and every fascination. What a couple they would make! Alas, and that would never be! Would she recognise her fiancé, when the war gave him back to her, battered, and at the end of his strength, destined to fade away? I pictured him on a long chair shivering and pulling his rug over his knees. The idea obsessed me. Like imaginations must harry him ceaselessly. With a vague eye, and a far-away look he must often be thinking of her, whom he would see again—if things were looked at in their best light—only for a moment.

The closest intimacy had sprung up between him and Guillaumin and me.

De Valpic was in the first platoon with Humel, Descroix and Playoust, and suffered more than we did from contact with that "lot." They disliked him, and reproached him with being stuck up, and sly,—he who was so simple, and straightforward! They did him bad turns, and arranged once or twice—we messed in platoons now—to defraud him of his share, on the pretext that he was late. Playoust who had wormed his way into the sergeant-major's good graces got the "viscount" warned for several tiring fatigues. At Béthaincourt, for instance, the unfortunate creature was left behind to wait for the certificate of good conduct. The Mayor, having finally refused, after long disputes, he caught us up in the middle of the night, after a forced march. We did not get wind of

this bullying at once. We did not see much of the Humel-Playoust set, and De Valpic hated making complaints; he would have preferred to see peace established, even if it were to his own detriment.

Everyday, however, we monopolised him more and more. He joined our mess which Gaufrèteau had agreed to manage, ever since Spincourt, and which aroused everyone's envy, so savory were the fumes which rose from it, even in the most tragic hours, and amid the dearth of all resources.

We three lost no time in finding each other during long halts, and at the end of the day's marching. When we were not too much worn out we had long confabs. The strange thing was that at those times De Valpic was the one of us who was always the most animated. He no longer slipped away! We wanted him to spare himself, but he, apologising for his fits of coughing, led us on in spite of ourselves, lavishly displaying the riches of his unusual mind. Was it with a view to diverting his thoughts, or did he realise that his enthusiasm was a source of inspiration to us? What a marvellous conversationalist he was! I was dumbfounded by the extent of his knowledge, the region of his curiosity. Our discussions often turned upon the issue of the present campaign. How great was his optimism based on facts, not on illusions! There was no pretension about it, by the way; it was all said in a playful friendly tone, which did not recoil on occasion before a crude or, shall we say, military expression emphasised by his rare smile.

We expressed our opinions, flattering, or the reverse, on everyone about us: *poilus*, N. C. O's, and our leaders. What intuition and penetration De Valpic showed. How shrewdly he judged poor Henriot, for

instance, who was completely demoralised, and, because he was ashamed of it, retired into his shell, and shunned all society.

“A Lorrain, and an elementary schoolmaster!”

He developed his idea, showing us that these frontier people were more chauvinistic than us, apparently, more warlike, and more nervous. It was they who had suffered most from the invasion in 1870, so that there was nothing more natural than that they should flag quickly at the arrival of a second disaster. They were always the first to suffer. And how easy it was to get into the habit of thinking of the enemy as insatiable and invincible, everlastingly stretching out its claws over their territory. And again he made game of our classic education which assuredly must temper the character by the obscure recollection it propagates of so many traits of heroism, of so many noble passions! But he interrupted himself, fearing to be too sweeping:

“For that matter, there are heaps of first-rate fellows among these schoolmasters!”

We knew some, but not as many as he did! He quoted various names. Hermeline in the 18th had died heroically the other day, defending the bridge at Cléry.

One evening our intercourse assumed a philosophic complexion. I amused myself by inveigling Guillaumin into insidious discussions. He fought hard, and appealed several times to De Valpic whose courteous decisions struck me by their perspicuity; and also to the highmindedness they seemed to bear witness to. And yet they must necessarily be inspired by some moral philosophy—Which? It will be remembered that the very sound of the word used to importunate me. Once started, I sketched the outline of my late

doctrines. I was curious to see with what dialectics my companions would oppose those I had so often proved irrefutable. I pressed them. I showed the logic of integral egoism, the impossibility for man to create any duty other than his happiness.

“What do you think about it, De Valpic?”

He quietly remarked that moral philosophy in his eyes was one with religion.

“Which religion?”

“I only know of one!”

This steadfastness did not displease me. I was not ignorant of his principles. I had seen him, the very day before, during our stay at Hazaumont, leave us to go and see a priest and communicate. Was his belief irrational—foolish? But at these fateful junctures, were not certain sublime follies our only stays?

CHAPTER V

A SHADOW ON THE PICTURE

It was fortunate that we were three friends, three brothers, each less devoted to himself than to the others. How lonely it would have been otherwise! In billets we sometimes happened to come across friends from other companies: Laraque, Ladmirault, or Holveck. There would be a handshake, and a few words, no more, and then we separated. They on their side lived for themselves. The breach between us and the other N. C. O's was widening.

I except Breton, the quartermaster-sergeant, who, on the contrary, sided with us. We must needs do him justice for the care and cleverness with which he accomplished his task of commanding No. 4 platoon where Hourcade seconded him badly, and keeping the books of the whole company under the captain's supervision. Sturdy and square-shouldered, it was good to see him going off with the camp material towards the end of a long halt. He nearly always succeeded in hunting out suitable sites. His responsibility and the country life suited him. He no doubt looked forward to the military medal, and the sergeant-major's stripe, at the end of this venture. Plucky under fire, and as much on the spot there as elsewhere, he always had his men well in hand. He had been won over by our conduct under fire. During his rare

leisure moments, he would willingly come and joke in our little group, which he dubbed "The Bachelors' Club." The only trouble was that with him you had to drink, drink, drink, the whole time. No drunkenness, but good hard drinking! We refused to join him for the first few days, but he called us molly-coddles, and almost took offence. De Valpic advised us to accept. We took turns to treat each other, here a pint, there a glass. After that it was a case of friendship till death, between him and us.

But the Humel-Playoust "lot"! Ravelli might rightly be classed with them now. I have spoken of the complete transformation which had been effected in him. It was doubtful whether the *poilus* ever heard the sound of his voice. Playoust had taken possession of him, getting hold of him through his weaknesses, flattering his Corsican vanity, but making a laughing-stock of him, though he was too stupid to see it. They never left each other, and were on the most familiar terms. These days, so fertile in surprises, had completely deranged the sergeant-major who had always been rather shaky in the upper storey. He saw spies everywhere—in all the old women, and priests, disguises which had as a matter of fact been made use of. Playoust spurred him on, for the amusement of the onlookers. The game was assuming alarming proportions. Ravelli, at Hazaumont, went to find the commanding officer, and handed over a list of suspects to him, which had been drawn slyly, by the other—all the parish priests in the neighbourhood! The captain was good-natured; he merely shook the poor sergeant-major:

"I shall keep my eye on you, my lad!"

Later on, on the evening of "Beauclair," Ravelli

only just missed throwing the whole division into a panic by yelling "The Uhlans!"

Trouble might have come of it. There was some question of reducing him to the ranks. His last chance of obtaining officer's rank was lost then.

But in spite of it he still continued to pin all his faith to Playoust. His ears buzzed, and he was continually asking:

"Is that firing, that we hear?"

"Exactly."

And the wretch pointed out some fleecy clouds in the sky.

"Look there. Shells bursting!"

"Good heavens! Marked again!"

But one thing that was not so funny was that since the sergeant-major continued to arrange the rounds of duty, Playoust made use of his power over him to get him to bully or favour certain men. De Valpic as has been seen was their principal victim. But directly we got wind of the matter, Breton warned Ravelli that we had decided to report it to the captain. The threat was sufficient, the normal time-table was immediately reverted to. All he gained by it was that Guillaumin, who was sickened by it, called him and his set, Brutus! and Blackguards! and refused point-blank to have anything to do with them in future.

Yes, that's what it came to in the end.

The N. C. O's of each company stuck together and had nothing to do with the others. In the sinister hours of that retreat! I blush to have to report it!

Hourcade was simply an unpleasant nincompoop. His only outstanding feature was his greed. If he had thrown in his lot with the Humel-Playoust set, it

was because he considered that he was more likely to pick up titbits there than anywhere else—a folly which prevented him from tasting Gaufrière's cooking! He stuffed into his haversack miscellaneous provisions, most of which he had shamefully gleaned from his men's rations. His mouth was always full. In billets, replete, not to say crammed, he quickly fell asleep and snored.

As for the two elementary schoolmasters, that was a simple matter: they hated us. Not starting from today or yesterday, but from several years ago, and before that—from birth. They were envious, embittered fellows, suffering, so De Valpic considered, from their semi-educated state. An ambiguous caste, despising the peasant and detesting the *bourgeois*, though we had nevertheless met and appreciated some lads belonging to the same class at the "Peloton," who were hard-working, intelligent, and ambitious, and had taken top places at the end of the year. But these were vulgar and envious on a level with most of them. Their physique was poor too. Even Descroix's strength, heavy and squat though he was, did not come near to ours; one felt that his blood had been impoverished and his muscles weakened by a studious youth, infrequent exercise, and poor nourishment. I considered him really repulsive with his flattened head, his stuck-out ears, his gaping mouth. I disliked him for all these signs of degeneration, and above all because of his deliberate cruelty towards the "viscount," and the brutal laugh with which he greeted Playoust's spiteful tricks. Humel, who was small and weakly, with a thin neck and bowed shoulders, and was always exhausted at the end of a day's march, inspired me with more indulgence. Was he not

the youngest of us since Frémont had disappeared? Once or twice I thought I saw a look of gentleness flit across his face, an expression which always attracts me. I had occasionally made certain advances. In vain. A fanatical disciple of his companions, he was not the least quick of them in administering offensive rebuffs.

Playoust had them all under his thumb. He was certainly smart, the rascal! I had been finely taken in at first by his look of a Paris street-urchin. He worked his open-handed, happy-go-lucky appearance, which makes the type so attractive, for all it was worth. And all the time he was as slippery and vicious as he could be. He hardly ever risked anything more than a casual piece of insolence on us, and he was the only one of the lot who continued to say good-day to us or to shake our hands, while, privately, he never ceased to stir up his acolytes against us. It must be noted too that he made game of them, cynically letting them in for endless fatigues. I bore him all the more ill-will for it, because, for a long time, I had thought I recognised a kindred spirit in him. Nothing had awakened in him—a proof that there was nothing lying dormant in him. What a hideous vision he afforded me of what I might have been.

Let there be no mistake about it. What annoyed us most about them all was the sight of their flabbiness and slackness. Since Spincourt they had chucked the whole show and were continually saying that they didn't care a blow what happened!

Their corporals were decent fellows and partially succeeded in making up for their deficiencies. Their men were no worse than most. But in spite of it their lack of authority came nigh to being disastrous on several occasions. To begin with, it was an admitted fact

that in their platoon they might get drunk with impunity. I remember the stink of wine and vomiting which rose from the stables where their men were billeted. How could De Valpic's have escaped the infection? Ravelli, who had been put up to it by the others, was always down on him. Playoust was charmed when the soldiers and the inhabitants were at loggerheads with each other. He tacitly encouraged the foraging and marauding that went on. Some of his *poilus* were mixed up in the rows at Béthaincourt.

Here is another occurrence which will serve to illustrate the different attitudes of mind. One grilling afternoon when we were passing the train of company waggons, the captain took it upon himself to give the most exhausted men permission to put their packs in the waggons. Our men were too proud. Their packs! They were quite capable of carrying them themselves, thanks! In the first platoon the N. C. O's were the first to unballast themselves; first, ten, then fifteen, then thirty of the men copied them. When that waggon was full, what should these fine gentlemen do, but set to work calmly to fill the next one that came along, which belonged to No. 20 company. The commanding officer, when he heard about it, came rushing up, inquired into the matter, bellowed like a bull and cancelled the permission. Our men chuckled over the occurrence. The others were furious: He'd better not bully them! Get away with him. They were fed up!

As the retirement went on the "set" kept up a stream of grumbles. The marches were too long. Poor reservists, we were being killed! Why did we halt so far from any well? Was it true that all the filth was thrown into them? Why was our company

always given the most disgusting quarters? It was not surprising! Our captain didn't get on with any one! Who had to pay? We of course! And the baksheesh? Who got the baksheesh? As there wasn't even a ration of brandy every day.

After "Beauclair" things got even worse. We only caught scraps of their declamations because they put on the soft pedal when they saw us coming, just as they did with the officers. Playoust among others was particularly good at posing as an excellent fellow who was never put out by anything. But out of the reach of "tell-tales" and "busy-bodies," their evil tongues wagged busily.

It was sickening! they declared. The commanding officers were the outside limit! According to them our brigadier-general, an old Colonial, drank. The colonel was the kind of man to get us all hacked to pieces for the sake of keeping up his reputation for bravery. They gave us to understand they were delighted to see him wounded, and they would have been even more so if he had not been replaced by that old "dug-out." For that matter, you only need look at the result in order to see what our leaders were! Hopeless! If we weren't done for we deserved to be. Marches and counter-marches, bad management. We could hold the Bosches when we got them to grips. There was nothing to beat a French soldier! But as for preparation. Blimey! The slackers who had to look after that! Descroix cast up his eyes, swearing that those responsible would be found among the old ministers and present deputies. He foretold retaliation in the shape of lawsuits, or riots. Why was there such a lack of heavy artillery, of machine-guns, of searchlight apparatus, and armoured cars? Why

did we see nothing of the aeroplanes whose praises we had had drummed into our ears for years?

We were getting near to all the senseless recriminations of 1870. But they were not quite so serious this time, in spite of everything. They did not accuse Poincaré of having been bribed, or Joffre of being a traitor. They did not even go so far as to say that this war was absurd or unjust. We had to defend ourselves, after all! The most bitter complaints were of incompetence, and of the lack of foresight. Enough to be demoralising!

They made tremendous fun of Ravelli and his fears, which they shared at the bottom. Especially the spies! They passed on their superstitious terror to their men. There could be nothing more depressing for them than to feel they were surrounded by a vague throng of enemies. It was like asking for hysterics. I remember how on the morning we were guarding part of the Meuse, a group of refugees from Montmédy came up, a family of five, including two children who implored us to help them across. They were fortunate in finding us. We showed them a ford and had them taken to the C. O. A little farther up the poor wretches had come across some men out of Playoust's platoon, who had insulted them and threatened to shoot them.

And then there were the false reports, the pseudo-news, invented or rumoured, but always bad: Italy entering the lists against us, or England's dilatoriness. We should have to pay damages! Or else, one way of getting out of it would be to leave our friends, the Russians, in the lurch. Not a thing to boast about, perhaps! But it would cut short this war, and they were fed up with it!

I am not exaggerating. They descended to these depths of ignominy. They were more at ease with De Valpic who slept with them, and he reported similar conversations. It did not do to attach too much importance to it. There was probably a good deal of "side" about it. They were so jealous of us. Or perhaps they thought it fine to pose, on their side, as people who were not to be humbugged, or again it might be simply the inconsequence of men who did not quite realise the situation, or the meaning of their words. Each of them egged the others on.

And to think—De Valpic inclined to the idea—that they were without doubt excellent Frenchmen, who, when it came to getting killed, would do the thing in style!

In any case nothing exasperated Guillaumin like their attitude. He announced his intention of going to the C. O. to get him to put an end to the scandal, at least twenty times. We restrained him, being opposed to all tale-telling. We endeavoured to prove to him that their wild talk had no effect. Playoust had had the reputation of being a wag ever since the beginning. None of the men would take his nonsense seriously.

Guillaumin did not give in:

"You'll see!" he said. "You don't realise that all that eats away and undermines. . . . It is bound to show itself in time!"

It was true enough! What a difference there was in the morale of the two platoons.

In ours, for instance, nobody ever reported sick unless he was suffering tortures. They made it a point of personal pride. In theirs, on the contrary! One morning, Guillaumin, who was sergeant of the day, had

put down eight men for medical parade. A mere trifle! He calmly undertook to cure them all by suggestion. His chief argument was that they would have to foot it for about five and a half miles, to reach the Medical Officer. Five of the men had their names scratched; the rest stuck to it. It happened to be one of Bouchut's bad days and he sent them all off with a flea in their ear.

And when we stormed Beauclair, what a tragic exhibition they gave of themselves. When we left the wood in extended order, ready to charge, we looked round for No. 1 platoon, which was to support us on our right. Not a sign of it to be seen. It made a cruel impression on us just as we were starting off with fixed bayonets. At last we saw Lieutenant Delafosse come out leading a handful of men, among them De Valpic and his half-section. Behind, a long way behind, was Humel. We charged and saw no more of them. In the uproar which followed upon the occupation of the village, the incident passed more or less unnoticed. But we learnt that the C. O. had rated Delafosse for it roundly. The latter, throwing off his reserve, frankly laid the blame on some of his N. C. O's who lacked go. . . . That was putting the case very mildly! De Valpic assured me that he had heard Descroix putting the drag on his men's eagerness. "Don't hurry lads! The first lot will be napooched!"

Here again no penalties were inflicted; they would have been too terrible. The well-known sentence for every weakness in military law is: *DEATH*.

This leniency was perhaps to be blamed. Who can say what an ill-omened influence our comrades exercised during the days that followed? It was the

most gloomy period of all. We abandoned first-rate positions without fighting. It was impossible to rely on any favourable information, however slight. Rumours circulated, and were added to, concerning our reverse in the North. The replenishment of munitions which had up till then been well-organised was failing. We were, as I have said, repeatedly in danger of being cut off, or of getting under fire from the pursuing batteries. Villages blazed behind us, or even on our flank—a palpable danger for our retreat. The ditches too were filled with soldiers, belonging chiefly to the regulars. Who could blame them for it? Boys of twenty, worn out by four weeks' overdriving, sleeping there, by the roadsides, for days and nights on end.

It was a bad example though. The temptation to copy them was so great. There were no more mounted police on the heels of the stragglers. Even they were fighting, so we were told.

That was how our numbers dwindled. We had realised the danger, and our efforts were combined in preventing any men from staying behind. We kept on urging them: "Come along now! Only a few miles more. You surely don't want to fall into the hands of the Huns!" And we laid to their charge abominable atrocities surpassed by reality.

At last we reached our goal. We lost only five men out of the platoon during that week, two of whom were ill, and two wounded. What leakage there was in No. 1 company! We got the exact figures from the quartermaster-sergeant, who had to draw up the numerical returns each evening. Breton stormed, excellent fellow that he was!

"Hang it all! *Poilus* are too precious to lose!"

One evening in Descroix's platoon only twenty-nine men were left, out of thirty-five the day before, and Breton cynically sneered: "Six more done a bunk!"

CHAPTER VI

THE POILUS

YES, Guillaumin had been quite right! Ever since we had rejoined at F—— his one care had been the morale of the men! On that, indeed, depended the fate of the country, united with that of the present campaign. And this morale, in its turn, depended partly on us, in view of our responsibility.

A task which was quite new to me. I have said how, at our departure, I could not conceive myself taking an interest in these dolts. Yes! But had I not felt them quiver as they marched at my side through the horror of the fire? The praise surprised on their lips that evening had made my heart beat—reciprocal esteem—and I had dreamt of something more.

During the long marches I took steps to get into touch with them, to overcome their shyness, the remains of their distrust. I was not afraid of showing a few of them what was in my heart. One of these was Icard, the miller, a steady, quiet fellow, whose good sense had struck me on several occasions. Under the present circumstances, the footing we were usually on, I said, was not enough. Complete harmony of mind and heart between us all seemed to me necessary for our common safety.

"We're fond enough of you, already, sergeant!"

I smiled.

"Fonder than you were at the beginning?"

"Yes, then we weren't exactly struck on you."

I think he was speaking at his comrades. Their instinct must have made them realise my friendly intentions. They quickly became more familiar and expansive. The last barrier had fallen.

I again appreciated Guillaumin's perspicuity. According to him these people dreaded betraying whatever tenderness and delicacy was aroused in them, by putting it into words. They were shy of talking about themselves, and expanded more willingly on a thousand and one abstract subjects. I had resigned myself to listening to an endless flow of words and pointless tales. They were flattered by my attention, and I was surprised to find them ten times less childish and narrow in their talk than many drawing-room conversationalists. It was the taste, innate in the French, for discussion and reasoning. Penetration and logic are ordinary qualities in them. Icard laid before me his views on the questions which impassioned him: agricultural economy, modern implements, the introduction of new crops, the causes and consequences of the population of the country districts, the remedies to be applied to it—all problems of vital importance to the nation. I who claimed to be so eclectic had to blush for myself because I had never considered them.

With him, and with some of the others, I took a delight in broaching the subject of socialistic doctrines. We were at one in our premises. Starting from that point I used to get them to talk, curious to see how much electioneering patter they had retained. More than mere words, in any case! Some of them were

imbued with the party point of view. Each of them, for that matter, followed wherever his temperament led him. Prunelle, the jeweller, favoured the view that the state should interfere as little as possible with individual enterprise. Icard, for his part, was a staunch advocate of a sort of dominant collectivism: of the most perfect organisation of society, down to the very smallest details, by its chosen representatives. He said to me:

“Look at the Bosches. They have it in a sense. That’s what constitutes their strength. It’s sad to think the poor brutes have to work for the King of Prussia!”

I tried, too, to probe their inmost convictions. Were they really keen about this struggle which would determine the future of their race?

It did not take long to convince me of it. Their patriotism was not an abstract quality: it was more than that—a tradition, almost a physical need. A free France was just as vital to them as eating or breathing. I had the opportunity of admiring the moral unity accomplished by the work of centuries of history. The Prussians had done these Beaucerons a personal injury in violating the distant Eastern frontier. No peace for them before these brigands had been sent back to where they came from! The question of Alsace-Lorraine affected them in a lesser degree. It was a long way off—almost an accomplished fact! But nevertheless it must be won back, if only as a matter of personal pride, for “swank”!

Their memory of the other war had not been at all obliterated, as I should have expected it to be. Most of them had heard from their parents what vexations and devastations their province had had to endure

in those bygone days. They had before their eyes the ravages of the present war. Hang it all! If only the Bosches did not advance too far! We mustn't be beaten again.

And then as Corporal Bouguet very neatly expressed it, considering how long we had been pestered by having to put in two or three years' military service, we should be dolts not to give them a good thrashing once and for all, for the sake of gaining a quiet life!

Their spirit in fact was marvellous. It must not be forgotten that we were still retreating! There was never a sign of real discouragement. It was sometimes upsetting, certainly, to leave superb positions without firing a single shot. But if it must be! If, as was still rumoured, it was for tactical reasons to lead the enemy into a trap! The fantastic exploits attributed to the artillery still continued to fire our imagination. Once or twice we met convoys of prisoners. Halloo! Things must be on the mend! And then, why attempt to give any explanation? Things went well, because they went well. Even in the first platoon there was never any serious trouble, the bad seed did not bear. There was nothing worse than a little slackness, rather less energy.

There was plenty of marching. Yes, but nothing dismal about it most of the time, especially when we thought we were getting near to the enemy when there would be a volley of witticisms:

"Halloo! Trichet!" Guillaumin exclaimed. "I suppose you think Prunelle's sight too good, and that's why you're sticking your gun into his eye?"

They laughed; the jeweller was short-sighted and wore glasses.

The men were generally allowed to sing. When I saw they were beginning to flag, I shouted:

"Strike up, Bouguet! Let's have one of your songs."

"Which shall it be, Sergeant?"

The corporal who was the songster of the platoon turned to me gaily. We were on excellent terms now.

Voices were raised demanding:

"*The Ace of Diamonds!*"

"*The Miller's Wife!*"

The corporal struck up.

Miller, miller, she betrays you!"

They exploded, nudging each other, and nodding in Icard's direction who was the first to appreciate the joke.

Or else it was the *Crocodiles*, doggerel brought into fashion by Lamalou, and which they never tired of:

A crocodile—on going off to war
Said "Good-bye, Kids"—but not for evermore.
His great tail—looking very elegant
He started off—to fight the elephant! . . .

Then the refrain!

Everyone joined in the chorus.

Oh the cro-cro-cro-, the cro-cro-cro-, the cro-co-di-iles,
All along the Nile! They have vanished, we'll say no more!

Childish songs, with a good swing to them. Fatigue was forgotten. Mile followed mile in the heat and dust. A refrain of that kind swept right along the column. While we drew breath, snatches of couplets reached us from the distance.

"Like nothin' on earth, those caterwaulers!" Judsi exclaimed.

Oh, that Judsi! What a type he was! The incarnation, the flower of the race. In each platoon of France's army, from end to end of the campaign, I bet there was a Judsi. A street-urchin, from Paris or elsewhere . . . An apache yesterday, perhaps—it was quite possible—but ennobled to-day by circumstances!

He was an admirable source of good-humour. Made to cheer up the others. He chatted without ceasing for hours and hours at a time, accumulating eccentricities of mimicry and expression. Nothing pleased him so much as to see that we were listening. That was the time when we played up hardest. I swear that by the unexpectedness of his sallies and the inflections of his hoarse voice, he often attained a pitch of drollery which was quite priceless. His slightest absurdities gave rise to fits of hilarious gaiety. The men pressed round him, as if on parade. It even interfered with the marching order. What should he do but organise relays! Every quarter of an hour, he said to his neighbours:

"'Ook it lads! Send some other pals along now, an' we'll see if I can't raise a smile out of 'em."

They gave up their places without any sour looks.

"Ain't 'e a caution!"

"Fit to make yer split, the blighter!"

He was never in better form than when we were in the tightest places, when all the others were down in the dumps. On the "Beauclair" evening, when we had to retire, he was worth seeing as he went off shouldering his rifle, with a Uhlan's helmet, picked up in some house, in his hand, and the air of a gentleman who had

just put an end to the war in the most brilliant style, and was on his way home where his little wife was waiting to welcome him with open arms! Or again on the next day. . . . A hail of shells, which was beginning, had just set fire to a little bit of a house. He asked the cook's permission to make the coffee, carried off the camp kettle, collected some brands from the beams, and boiled the water on them at the window. The shower of the "Black Marias" continued. It was a miracle that he was not killed. But his luck, our luck, held.

What endless queer characters there were! Lamalou, Bouguet, Gaudéreaux. We've seen them all at work—one might go on naming them indefinitely. And Bouillon!

He had come one morning to ask my advice as to how to send money orders.

I had taken it as a joke:

"Send them, my dear fellow? This is more the sort of time to receive them!"

"It's for Marie," he said, "who's stayed behind with the kid!"

"Your kid?"

"I don't know about that!"

He explained that he had lived with a girl, a rag-gatherer like himself. They had struck up acquaintance when plying their hooks, and made love across the dust-bins—and they had come to an understanding. So far, so good. But then at the end of eight months—eight months exactly, that was the annoying part!—Marie had gone to Boucicaut for the birth of her child, a little duck, as pretty as could be! The point was not so much to find out who its father was, as to rear the little brat! It used to be quite a paying job—

but then the great Trafalgar had come, and Blimey! ever since then there hadn't been none too much to be scratched up out o' them dust-bins—so he thought that as he had a bit o' cash he'd better send some to Marie, if it weren't more'n ten francs.

I realised that he must be economising out of the little tips he got from me. I was much touched by his story, and promised to make inquiries.

The matter would depend on the baggage-master. He did not put in an appearance just then. Bouillon asked me about the matter again. I mentioned it casually to Henriot who sent me to the captain. He greeted me affably, and I laid the matter before him. He called me back. He had learnt, he said, of my brother's death, and he expressed his sympathy for me. He added that he had watched me at work. "I'm glad to see you've been making yourself useful."

As for the money order, he undertook to see that it got to its destination, solemnly took the girl's address, and handed me a receipt.

When he got it, Bouillon turned it over and over, and asked me what it meant.

The little sum had been doubled by me and doubled again by the captain.

His tanned face contracted; and tears glistened in the corners of his big eyes. He stammered in his effort to thank me.

"Oh! R-r-rooky!"

I gave him a smack on the shoulder, and told him—and how sincerely I meant it—that we owed him a hundred times more!

CHAPTER VII

SOCIALISM

USEFUL! I was making myself useful! The captain's words rang in my ears.

I remembered how I had wondered quite lately what use my life was, and who in the world would have suffered by it, or missed me if I had disappeared. Instead of which I filled a place well, to-day. My death would have been a loss. I certainly exaggerated the importance of my rôle, but the satisfaction each evening of having kept intact or added to the strength which was given to me, was so sweet to me.

It did me more credit, perhaps, than some of the others. I had always professed not only a lack of curiosity about all manual labour, but a disgust of it. It was the stupidity of a young intellectual inclined to consider everything which did not show off the superior play of thought as a vulgar task. Who would dream how far I carried this detachment? The farthest I ever got, towards the end of my term of service, was to do up the buckles of my pack,—Guillaume always had to help me. I had begun to realise during the last few days what grandeur may lie in the fulfilment of humble duties. A leader of men, especially in the modest sphere in which I gravitated owing to my lowly rank, has no right to shirk any subjection. He does not get into touch with his subordinates, or

inspire them with complete esteem and confidence, unless he succeeds in proving to them that even in the field of everyday tasks, he is cleverer, better informed, and more expert than they are. The complete man calmly considers all the difficulties which may arise, from the most trivial to the most serious, and being unworthy of none of them, considers none of them unworthy of him.

So I no longer avoided, but rather sought, occasions to expend myself. I followed Guillaumin's example, and drew on all I had read and remembered. To speak the truth, when I tried, inexperienced as I was, to put my ideas into practice, my advice was not very much to the point.

Bouillon doubled up with laughter when I told him to damp the case of his water-bottle, or again when we got to our quarters that rainy evening and I advised him to stuff his boots with dry straw.

"Go an' teach yer grandfather! Just take a look at yours, an' see if I 'aven't done it!"

The last of my *poilus* could have put me right on endless questions of a practical nature. Quite so! But I could be useful to them in other ways. Once when arms were being cleaned, Gaudéreaux had seen fit to take his repeating apparatus to pieces, and came to grief over putting it together again. He called me to his aid. It was a difficult problem. Guillaumin certainly offered me his help, but I refused it, anxious to find out how to do it myself. It took me a long time, but I succeeded at last, which was satisfactory.

There was a large field open to me. I had retained the knowledge I had acquired as an instructor of recruits. It was not a question of worrying the men with theories, but they willingly collected to have

friendly chats, and ended by enjoying the séances, where one evening, after having explained the principles of orientation to them, I taught them how to recognise the Great Bear and the Polar Star. On other days we went into other matters: to do with the advance under fire, of the artillery and infantry (we knew all about that!), of the supply of ammunition and the commissariat; or of subjects vaster still—Germany's ambitions, and the causes of the present war. When we were marching we organised competitions in judging distances. We picked out a tree or a house, and then each one had to calculate how many steps he expected to take, and count them afterwards to see how far out he was. Lamalou proved to be extraordinarily gifted in this respect. He was never more than twenty yards out. We would find a way of making use of that.

After a few tentative ventures, I found my bent. I had always been interested in medicine. A handbook on hygiene, which De Valpic lent me, completed my sketchy equipment. The next thing to be done was to put it into practice. The soldiers suffered chiefly, as usual, from sore feet—a crop of blisters and sores. I preached cleanliness first, and methodical greasing. But the sore places, some of which were septic, must be cured. Most of the men seemed entirely ignorant of how to treat a blister. Guillaumin and I arranged a demonstration one evening with great success. Once having won their confidence, we treated them for various little ills—diluted tincture of iodine did wonders.

One great danger was the water, which caused a great deal of diarrhoea. It was not always possible to boil the contents of our water-bottles. I had some

permanganate of potash; a few crystals placed in the water-buckets assured a relative sterilisation. Our platoon made it a point of honour to have as few men as possible at sick parade. We only had two in a week. Trichet, who sprained his ankle, wept with rage at leaving us.

My little cures were appreciated. Men came to ask my advice now, even from No. 1 platoon. I had some idea of massage and set up a surgery. The men appealed to me in doubtful cases. One evening, I remember, the party sent on ahead to choose the camp had picked some mushrooms on the way. Breton insisted on their waiting for me. I really was not very well up in the matter. However, I did not quite like the look of the valvular formation at the base, and ordered them to throw them away. They obeyed without protesting. I learnt shortly afterwards from De Valpic, that it had saved a good many lives.

How much joy I got out of my disinterested efforts! Not only that of useful labour accomplished. The incessant contact, our conversations, the services rendered mutually, made me fonder of each of my companions every day. I was getting into touch with the people again. I no longer considered, as I used to, that it would satisfy me to live in the bosom of a restricted caste of beings brought up in the same way as I had been. I suddenly once more became aware of the ascendancy of certain doctrines.

Social morality had always seemed to be a poor morality for those on the right side of the barrier, as I was. Now I realised my mistake. There should be neither oppressors nor oppressed, neither dominators nor dominated,—alliance and not confusion of

the different social classes. "Each for all and all for each," as the old saying is. Were we not all co-operating with the same heart in the same work? If between these soldiers and me there was a dissimilarity in education and disposition, if I, at their head, was exempt from the most thankless fatigues, did that prevent reciprocal collaboration and esteem, or stop any one being satisfied with their fate? No, no. Prunelle agreed; the chief thing was that each class should know the other, then it would not be long before they appreciated each other, and recognised each other as brothers, and not such very different brothers either!

This idea, in particular, clung to me. Disparities due to education and upbringing, to the style of life, are, to a certain extent, exterior. How little they count for in comparison with the tongue, the customs, and disposition which are shared in common by the sons of one nation and which draw them together. Between the people and the aristocracy the difference is simply that which exists between youth and ripe middle age. The people are like a young and lusty lad, who only asks to be allowed to grow! What were the common sense of an Icard, the animation of a Judsi, the self-denial of a Bouillon, if not the deep-rooted qualities of our soil and race? There is enjoyment in breathing them, when one also exhales them!

CHAPTER VIII

A TEMPTATION

How tired we were that evening. Really absolutely done. We had been marching for twenty-four hours, almost without a halt. We were wandering in the middle of Argonne in that part of the Chalade, and the Four de Paris which were to be mentioned so often in the *communiqués* later on. The worst of it was that we had nothing to eat, except the remains of some bread crumbling at the bottom of our haversacks. We regretted having wasted the biscuits with which we had been so liberally provided two days before.

There was a prolonged halt in the forest. At one time we caught sight of two motor-buses which cut across, following a transverse roadway. Our rations? We took it for granted and rejoined accordingly. But perhaps the conductors had not seen us. Several minutes went by. The commanding officer blew his whistle, and off we had to go again! Another march on an empty stomach!

A blast of recriminations blew from No. 1 platoon. They could put up with being knocked on the head, but at least give them something to eat. They were being cut down every day now. Yesterday there was no meat! Without rot, there was nothing more to be done but to "get down" to it. A snooze is as good as a

meal. It would only mean that a few would be taken.

They went on all the same. There was not a murmur among our men. Judsi still tried to cheer up his companions, but they were n't in the mood for it. Bouguet struck up with a song, but they joined in the refrain only once. He couldn't sing on an empty stomach either. And the rain began, heavy rain which soaked us through to the skin in a very few minutes.

"Rotten luck!" Gaudéreaux jerked out.

We went on without a halt, through the downpour, against the wind. We were on a by-road which soon got spoilt and broken. We slithered through the slush. Gusts of wind beat against us, water was dripping down our backs, freezing the sweat on our skins. That lasted for another two hours. A dozen miles or so without a pause. No one protested, each step must be bringing us nearer to shelter. There was only one question we asked ourselves, in an agony of mind: Should we get anything to eat?

At last they stopped us, two companies of us, in front of a farm. The rest of the battalion went on. The buildings already sheltered some gunners—four batteries of them. I remember their greeting which was anything but cordial. Oh, we were the last straw! As if they weren't packed like sardines already! Dirty foot-sloggers too! (I have already mentioned the antagonism between the different troops which was exasperated at such times.)

Our quartermasters quarrelled. But the first comers blocked up the coach-houses, their officers backed them up, the commanding officer had quite rightly reserved the only bed for himself. We stood in the yard for a long time, haggard and numb

with cold. We were finally penned in the stables—piggeries, in an indescribable state of filth, and reeking pestilentially. Someone went to get straw—a handful per man! We could have put up with everything if only we could have got a bite. But it was getting dark, and in this weather all hopes of the ration train hunting us out were dwindling. The gunners had hastened to lay hands on anything that the farm would produce in the way of eatables, bread, milk, eggs, a real raid. They finished swallowing these provisions under our very noses.

I can see us in that filthy stable. De Valpic had just lain down alongside the wall. He was worn out, and wanted to sleep, but the fits of coughing which shook him made him reopen his eyes. He was shivering. We all had faces mottled by exhaustion and starvation. Lamalou suddenly got up with an oath:

“Oh d——!”

There was a crack in the roof, from which drops were falling. A stream of water was soon trickling down.

Guillaumin came back. He had been to have a look at No. 1 platoon. There was schism in the Playoust “set.” Hourcade and Descroix, it seemed, were still in possession of some “ruti” and a cheese. Descroix resigned himself to sharing it and favoured Playoust, but Hourcade turned a deaf ear. Little Humel would get nothing out of him—or the sergeant-major either. They neither of them demanded it, though they were both deadly white and worn out.

Guillaumin winked:

“If only we could find some way! I say, are you frightfully done up, to begin with?”

“Fit as a fiddle, I don’t think! Why?”

"Look here."

He confided in me that he had interviewed the farmer's wife. There was not a village anywhere near, the nearest was nine miles away, and had been crammed with troops for the last week.

"Well?"

"But there was another farm much nearer, a rich one, quite hidden in the woods. Suppose we went to see?"

I raised some objections, for form's sake, but the adventure attracted me. A word to Bouillon. He at once wanted to join us. We told no one else; permission and success were equally uncertain. So we started off. It was getting dark. What a road it was! The mud was eighteen inches thick in places. Torrents of rain still, and the gloom was deepening. To begin with we forced ourselves to look where we were putting our feet, but we gave it up as a bad job. Squidge, splosh! We stoically followed in Guillaumin's tracks. We sank in half-way up to our knees, and came near to losing our balance or getting stuck.

When we had walked for three quarters of an hour, Guillaumin began to get worried. Half a mile the woman had told him.

We were lost? We thought of retracing our steps when he bumped against a gate in the dark.

"Ow! As if my nose wasn't thick enough without that!"

We began to make out the outlines of an obstruction. But everything seemed to be shut up. No light. We went to knock at the door. Not a sound. We knocked louder.

"Done!" I said.

"We'll soon see!"

Guillaumin raised his voice:

"Two petards of melinite to blow up your house!"

A few seconds passed. Then a window squeaked.

"Who's there?"

"France."

"What do you mean? France."

"France, that's quite enough."

"Wot d'you want?"

"Someone to open the door to us."

"We 'aven't got nothing."

"That's a fine story!"

"An wot abaht the Proosians?"

"Will you let us in, confound you!"

The man appeared to be frightened, and muttered:
"Arf a mo' till I gits into me breeches."

He came and undid the bolts . . . A bent old peasant, carrying a candle in his hand.

"Ello, on'y three of you! Might 'a bin fifty by the shindy you kicked up!"

He seemed to me to regret having given in so easily. We went into a low room.

"Well now," said Guillaumin, "What can you give us to eat?"

The old peasant looked us up and down. I could read in his face the mistrust and avarice of bad breeds.

"'Aven't I told you there's nothin'?"

Guillaumin shrugged his shoulders.

"What do you live on? Air?"

We certainly looked like marauders. I interfered to reassure the man.

"We'll pay you all right!"

Guillaumin whispered:

"Don't know so much about that."

I had my own idea. I opened my purse to show the silver and gold in it.

The old fellow considered me. He looked from my hands to my eyes where he tried to read my intentions.

"For you three?"

"For us, to begin with."

"Hm! Would an omelette do you?"

"With some ham?"

He would see.

We sat down at the table. The man went to call at an inside door.

"Louise!"

A young country girl appeared, with a hypocritical expression and heavy features. She lacked real grace, but was built on a generous scale, her waist well-marked, and her bosom firm beneath the dress which she had popped on hurriedly.

"My eye!" murmured Bouillon.

The old man said a few words in patois and the girl knelt down in front of the grate and began to work a bellows. It was not long before some flames sprang from the dying embers. In a hand's turn she had laid the table for us. Five minutes later a frothy golden omelette was dished up for us.

We had never been so ravenous. We simply guzzled. We had taken off our great coats, which were stiff with rain. When his first pangs were assuaged, Guillaumin began to cheer up.

"A pretty good idea of mine, what?"

With a glance at the girl I made some joke under my breath, about the servant girl being, perhaps, the old man's mistress.

Bouillon was eating too gluttonously to take a part

in the conversation, but he laughed continually for no reason at all, pouring down bumpers of some rather poor wine which the old man had brought us with many sour looks. His face was turning purple, his dog's eyes glistened. How I loved him, taking his share of our animal contentment.

The peasant seated at the end of the room had lit a pipe and was watching us out of the corner of his eye.

"It's stupid to pay!" repeated Guillaumin. "Let's give him an I O U."

His funds must have been coming to an end.

"Don't worry! This is my show!" I said.

In order to avoid any trouble, I had made up my mind to pay whatever the old fellow claimed.

Guillaumin ventured to suggest:

"I say we ought to take something back to De Valpic."

"And to our *poilus!*"

I called the old man, who got up slowly and came to us looking rather anxious but crafty too.

"And now what about something for our pals?"

"They ain't comin', are they?"

"That depends."

"Wot does it depend on?"

"Upon what you give us for them."

This seemed to upset him. He sniffed and stopped talking.

"When I say give," I corrected myself, "I mean sell."

"Ow many of 'em is there?"

"About forty."

The peasant threw up his arms like a clockwork figure.

"Forty. Jokin', ain't you? Now if it 'ad a' bin five or six, p'raps we might 'a managed some'ow!"

Guillaumin rapped on the table, and assumed a threatening air, which was rendered even more grotesque and terrifying by his great nose.

"You'd better take care we don't bring them along! I've an idea they'd manage to find something!"

The old man's face hardened. I again intervened.

"I tell you we'll pay. Now tell me the price of a chicken."

"Ain't got none!"

"What, not in your cellar?"

"Ain't got none."

"Will you take ten francs apiece?"

"Ten francs?"

He rubbed his hands.

"That's talkin', that is!"

Guillaumin exclaimed:

"Five francs, not a halfpenny more. It's pure robbery!"

I continued:

"I should want several!"

"How many?"

I looked at the others interrogatively.

"Eight or ten—a dozen if you've got them!"

"A dozen chickens at ten francs? That's a hundred and twenty francs?"

"Yes."

"I'll just have a look, but I won't promise nothing!" he said as he went off.

When he had gone out, without bothering about the girl who was leaning against the chimney-piece, and watching us slyly, Guillaumin slated me. Ten francs apiece. He never heard of such a thing. Was I

crazy? A hundred and twenty francs! No. It couldn't be allowed. I should want the cash some day or other. I didn't realise . . . The old chap was sickening. It would serve him right if we cleared him out of everything and left him an order payable at the end of the war. So that was settled? What?

But I shook my head, and stuck to it. I had spent a relatively infinitesimal sum up till now. The chance was too tempting!

The peasant reappeared. He brought the poultry back with him, tied by their legs. They were squalling hard and were certainly very fine birds. His forehead was wrinkled; he must be afraid we might give him the slip and be off with the booty. His face cleared when I laid the purse on the table. But when I pulled a hundred-franc note out of my pocket, the old fellow waived it aside, and pointed to the purse.

"None o' that now! You've got that amount in solid gold!"

"Take this note?" I retorted.

"Give me gold, gold!"

"Why on earth should I?"

I had not foreseen this pretext for cavilling when I had flattered myself on avoiding a scene. I refused to give in. The old chap kicked against the pricks. Paper-money? Wot good was that to any one nowadays, you wouldn't get a hunk of bread for it!

He obviously distrusted me. I was on the point of losing my temper. Guillaumin angrily dubbed the old man a robber and a blooming Bosche. The latter got annoyed and made as if to take back his poultry. Bouillon kept his eyes fixed on me, and was

only waiting for a sign to hurl himself upon the old man.

For a fantastical instant I was tempted to let him have his way. I was enraged, and disgusted. More than that, I was suddenly seized with a longing to loot. It would be a wonderful opportunity. What risk should we run? None at all. It would simply be one more picturesque scene to add to our store of memories.

At that moment, the servant girl happened to cross the bottom of the room. Her dress fell into lines which suggested the rounded form beneath. Bouillon was looking at her too, and Guillaumin also. His big red nose was quivering. The blood rushed to my head, and desire took possession of me. We all three exchanged a look of feverish bestiality. Plunder the old man, violate the girl. Nothing could be easier—some strange madness urged us on—the beast in us was raising its head.

A vision of Jeannine passed through my mind, but it held no power to restrain me, for was it not purely a physical impulse? It did not count in my eyes. No one would ever know anything about it, I repeated to myself. Why not indulge this whim? It was a sinister moment. We had each taken a step towards the girl, whose face contracted.

CHAPTER IX

AT PEACE WITH MYSELF

AND then, after all, something stopped me, something I had never experienced before. Was it prejudice? Or moral restraint? I had no time to examine my feelings. Was it self-respect? Yes, that, without doubt. No one would ever know anything about it, but I should know about it myself!

"Make up your mind!" I said to the man.

Had he an inkling of the danger he had been in? In any case he acquiesced without a word, and took the note, to which I added a louis.

I commandeered the rest of the bread, and three dozen eggs, which the girl was to boil till they were hard. She bustled about, but it took some time.

I paid for everything at three times its value, without turning a hair. The old man got a second louis, and to show his satisfaction, threw in a packet of salt!

I will not dwell upon our return journey. Bouillon had hung a cord round his neck with the poultry dangling at each end of it, in two bunches. They struggled and made a deafening din and twice over almost tripped him up. He gravely warned them:

"If you do that a third time, I shall lose my temper!"

Thirty yards farther on, he stopped.

"Got a pin?"

I handed him one without understanding why he wanted it.

He turned away. I became aware of a wild flapping, and then a faint rattle. "Next please!"

"I'll learn 'em not to be so bloomin' fond o' fies!"

He pricked them behind the head, one after the other, sighing.

"If only they was some o' them Bosches!"

When he entered the stable in front of us half an hour later, with the chaplet of chickens round his neck, the men were stupefied. Then an uproar arose.

"Oh! the cannibal!" cried Judsi.

"Good biz; grub at last!"

The men who were asleep had to be shaken and roused up. Their faces broke into broad smiles, their eyes lit up. Things went very quickly when once they were all up. Some of them had already been told off to pluck, to light fires, and do the roasting. Everyone hurried into the yard. Guillaumin and I slipped down beside De Valpic and told him all about our pranks. Guillaumin gaily gave him an account of the longing which had seized us, to despoil the old man, and violate the girl. It was a tremendous joy to have a conscience clear enough to be able to joke about it. De Valpic smiled in response. One felt how his whole being was yearning for the nourishment of which he had been deprived for nearly forty-eight hours.

We went to supervise the cooking. In the twinkling of an eye the men had built up piles of branches, and succeeded in lighting them, though the yard was soaking. The chickens had been plucked and dressed and were roasting fast, threaded on to bayonets which

willing volunteers were turning conscientiously under Gaufrière's direction. By his orders, too, bowls were put under them to catch the fat dripping from them. In half an hour's time, he pronounced the birds cooked to a turn. We presided over the division. Nothing was to go out of the platoon!

The battalion sergeant-major came and hung about.

"Halloa. Some looting been going on!"

"No," said Bouillon, "the sergeant paid, and a good price too."

Ravelli stood in the mud near by, and sniffed the good smell. But a remnant of dignity forbade him to beg. We ended by taking pity on him, and offering him a fine fleshy bone, which he set to work to gnaw like a dog.

I was tormented for quite a long time—poor wretches that we are—by the paltry fear that the men might not realise to the full to whom they owed the windfall. They had quite cheered up, and I saw them grouped round the fires which still flickered, and lit up their delighted faces, chewing the remains of their bones and munching their eggs. Perhaps they imagined that the company's mess-balance had paid for the feast. In any case their gratitude to my companions was just as great as it was to me. I should have liked to monopolise it!

Then I shook off this paltry thought. What was all this about benefactors and debtors. A lot there was to be proud about, in having paid, when I had the money to pay with. One felt that the good fellows would every one of them be capable of a similar action, rather than surprised at it!

Candour, simplicity of soul. Another effort. I was pulling myself up to it.

Guillaumin and I had reserved one whole chicken for ourselves. We took the best half of it to De Valpic. Alas! his appetite failed after the first mouthfuls, and he had great difficulty in getting through it.

We had decided to offer the captain a wing. Guillaumin, who had undertaken to be the ambassador, soon came back. Ribet had refused it—oh, as nicely as possible assuring Guillaumin that he needed nothing. If we had a portion over, let it be for one of his men, who had their packs to carry!

Henriot must have got wind of this reply, for his was identical. The third one, Delafosse, we knew nothing about him; nobody thought about him. But Breton, when he was invited, did not turn up his nose at it, and came to revive himself by us. He congratulated us:

“These bachelors knew how to look after themselves—and no mistake!”

And what about the Playoust set. De Valpic having timidly suggested that we might—Guillaumin exploded:

“Never! Low-down cads like that! Why they’d let us starve without turning a hair.”

I backed him up, and De Valpic said no more.

We three each put part of the remains on one side. It was rather shocking, I admitted to myself, to be thinking of our future hunger, when comrades at hand were suffering the pangs of present hunger.

But after all! I had done enough for others to last me for one day!

I had gone out into the yard again. It was almost deserted now, but I came across Humel. He pretended not to see me. His cap, which was cocked

over one ear, gave him a cheeky look, but I caught sight of his haggard face and sunken cheeks by the light of one of the bonfires which was still smouldering. I turned round:

“I say, Humel!”

He stopped, and aggressively snapped:

“Well? What do you want?”

“You’ve had nothing, have you?”

“Had nothing . . . what do you mean?”

“To get your teeth into!”

He hesitated:

“A lot you care!”

I went up to him, and put my hand on his shoulder:

“Like a bit of chicken?”

He made a movement as if to free himself, and then thought better of it, and said more gently:

“Have you got some left?”

“Yes, and a hard-boiled egg. Wait a bit!”

I went back into the piggery, and very stealthily—I did not want Guillaumin to see me—took out my mess-tin, which contained my provisions for the next day, then I rejoined Humel.

“Here you are.”

We went and sat down in the shade on the curb of the well.

“You can use my mess-tin.”

The poor boy began to eat hurriedly, and in silence. I told him, in a joking tone, the story of our expedition; and meanwhile stealthily examined his thin profile. He was a mere boy. A younger brother, this lad too, younger not only in years . . . He was thirsty. I pulled up a bucket of water for him and we drank out of the same mug.

Then making a violent effort to get over what I think was timidity he said to me:

"Thanks very much."

I replied:

"Look here, old chap, don't you think we ought all to be pals?"

As he nodded in agreement, I ventured on to more ticklish ground. With all sorts of precautions, and wordy extenuations, I let him see how necessary it was, in the present circumstances, not to let the men's morale be shaken. It was for us in particular, who mixed with the troops to preach it to them, and to practise what we preached. There were so many shining reasons to hope. Complaints were so harmful.

It was a dangerous subject, I repeat. Humel was already chafing under my remarks and beginning to protest—(Where is the man who will submit to being taught his business?)—I went off at a tangent, just in time, and roundly abused Ployust and Descroix—Humel I affected to accept, to consider that as far as he was able to, he tried to react against a troublesome state of mind; I considered him the only N. C. O. who counted in No. 1 platoon, as De Valpic was too ill but I hoped that he would redouble his efforts!

The most transparent ruses were successful. Humel gave up rebelling. I do not know whether he flattered himself that he was like the portrait I drew of him, but he nodded approvingly. When you catch people doing wrong they are so grateful to you when you do not humiliate them.

We shook hands heartily when we separated. I kept his youthful fist in mine for a minute:

"*Au revoir*, my lad!"

"See you to-morrow!"

One more on our side, perhaps!

I went to lie down on our dung-heap. My companions were already asleep. I looked affectionately at Bouillon and Guillaumin for a moment—then I scribbled a few lines to Jeannine, and lay down at peace with myself.

BOOK VIII

September 2nd-7th

CHAPTER X

NEWS AT LAST!

THE next day reinforcements arrived from our depot. There were forty men for the company, one of whom was an N. C. O. called Langlois—seven men for the section.

The poor wretches were very much depressed. They had been detained at Bar-le-Duc, and sent off to find us, in charge of a subaltern. They had been wandering about for three days, with little or no food. They were worn out when they joined us. Their feet were bleeding, and in their eyes was the reflection of horrible visions. Oh, those fields of corpses! And the smell! Several of them were sick once more at the mere recollection of it. Or again, in other places—those bodies buried in haste—the arms and feet sticking out of the ground! And then, on the second evening they had suddenly found themselves in the firing line. Bullets whizzed past their ears—Zzp, Zzp—and shells surrounded them. Several of their men had already been killed.

It must be added that these men left F—— five days before under a gloomy impression. News had just got through of our regiment of regulars who since the very beginning had been fighting a few miles away from us, though we had never come across them. And what news it was! Leaving Longuyon on the morning of the 21st, engaged that evening at Ethes, and thrown back on Tellencourt, they had been, so to speak, volatilised, during those two days. Their losses had been enormous. One battalion had been wiped out and another was missing—the only hope was that the whole of it might have been taken prisoners—the third had been saved by the self-possession of a company commander.

When one thought of the recruiting, to a great extent local—The regulars! All the young harvest! The flower of the country! A great many of our *poilus* had a younger brother, sometimes two or three, among these troops which were said to be exterminated. They were to be seen with anxious eyes, and quivering nostrils, hazarding some name or other, in an agony of suspense. Details were generally lacking, but a trenchant reply would sometimes come:

“Killed, killed!”

“Killed?”

“Exactly.”

What a blow it was. Some of them staggered, but most of them bowed their heads and said nothing. Then seized with compassion, I would go up to them.

“Poor old chap!” I soothed them with a vague hope—how many of the missing would turn up again?

What I was more anxious about than anything else was, as may be imagined, the general situation. What was happening? I feverishly questioned Langlois.

He was a schoolmaster too, but from Paris. Playoust's set had immediately tried to get hold of him, but he made it quite clear that he intended to remain neutral, on good terms with us. He had an interesting head. He was sunburnt, and had intensely blue eyes, a big nose with a narrow bridge, and a determined chin. Besides that, he was slim and muscular, and had a graceful carriage. There was a look of a musketeer or condottiere about him—a look which was deceptive for that matter, as I soon realised. He was a good sort, but nothing beyond that. His intelligence was limited.

During his weeks at the *depôt* everything seemed to have rolled off him, like water off a duck's back, without making the faintest impression. He was eager for news, no doubt, but he was far from attaching to it the tragic and capital importance which clothed the least occurrence in this hour of our history.

It was disappointing and exasperating to me. I would have given a lot to meet Fortin and have a talk with him. We had just heard that he had become a humble private again, and was with the reinforcement detachment.

However, I set about extracting all the news from Langlois, bit by bit, and finished by attaining my end.

To begin with, the period of optimism had continued. The enemy had been intercepted on the Meuse, and at Liège, Namur, and Dinant. Our offensive was developing at Mulhouse and towards Morhange. That had gone on until Friday, the 21st. That day's *communiqué* still gave a favourable picture of the situation. There were two shadows on it, however: the day was described as having been "less fortunate" in Lorraine, and the occupation of Brussels. The next

day, there was nothing very new. A huge battle was going on. The guns were talking.

Complete silence for two days. On the third—it was Tuesday—the *communiqué* announced, in terms very flattering to our troops, that the attack had had no decisive results and that we had fallen back on our covering positions. The casualties were heavy on both sides. One paper claimed to see a second Valmy in the engagement.

But since then things had been going from bad to worse! To how great an extent? I pressed Langlois, and implored him to try and recall the smallest details—the text even of the bulletins. We were holding out? Apparently. Towards Nancy our luck seemed to be re-establishing itself. In the North? Oh. Langlois admitted that he really knew nothing about the North. I pretended to be as calm as possible in order to encourage him. Come along! The daily reports? What did they point to? They were perplexing—"The English have lost a little ground on our extreme left . . ." "We have had to bring our line slightly farther back . . ." What else? Ever since the day following "Charleroi" they had talked of German patrol parties venturing right up to near Douai and Valenciennes. A note which had an official twang about it had appeared on this subject. There was no cause for alarm! Merely isolated instances! That was all very well! But the same day we read in the socialistic manifesto that "Our richest and most cultivated regions are invaded."

"And what about the Russians?" I asked. "Haven't they come in yet?"

"Yes—things are going all right down there apparently."

There were no details, of course.

The detachment had left F——, Langlois continued, at midday on the 29th,—the Paris dailies had just arrived.

This time there was a *communiqué* which was undeniably odd. Even he had been startled. He quoted the exact text: "*The situation on our front, from the Somme to the Vosges, is exactly the same to-day as it was yesterday.*"

From the Somme to the Vosges! It was my turn to get a shock. What! Then the Huns were at Amiens! Yes, everything went to prove it. Even nearer perhaps? They had heard a rumour on their train journey, of sanguinary engagements at Bapaume and at Peronne. Other reports were circulating. Soisson and St. Quentin were said to have been cut off, the Compiègne forest on fire.

I would not believe it all. I clung to the *communiqué* of the 27th. But in any case it was a terrible awakening. Even Guillaumin, who joined us, was not incredulous, for once. An orderly had just confirmed the news of the investment of La Fère. We put this fortress down as being about halfway between the frontier and Paris. Was the capital in danger? Not yet, after all! We pictured a huge force barring the way to the intrenched camp.

What worried me most was public opinion which, with us, is so nervous and impressionable. There was good reason to be calm about the morale of the army. But the departments in the background. We were given a gloomy reflection of the spirit reigning there now. . . .

And the government especially? I had a vague dread of some faltering, some lack of real energy in

this coterie of middle-aged *bourgeois*, who had grown up amid the dejection which had followed the defeat, and had been softened by forty years of enjoyable egoism. Would they hold out? What did we know of it? We had got no more letters since the game had been played and lost in the North.

Certain facts which I learnt from Langlois were not calculated to reassure me. The cabinet had been modified! Socialists in the Ministry. If it should mean the road to some humiliating pact? There was still a fear of civil war, in which France would drown herself in a fratricidal struggle or, worse than all else, fling herself into the arms of the infamous wretch who would speak of peace!

I kept my anxiety to myself in my continuous endeavour not to shake any one's courage. I watched my *poilus* with delight as they exerted themselves to cheer up the new-comers. The Judsis and Lamalous laughed at their glum looks.

"Like to know wot they'd say, if they'd seen any real fightin'! . . ."

They pulled their legs, inventing fantastic feats of prowess by the regiment, or the company. The taking of "Beauclair" for instance! Judsi often returned to the subject of that exploit. They had found more burnt and spitted Bosches in there than you'd believe possible. A carpet, no a pile, of them rising right up to the first storey. Maddening for the ground-floor people of whom there was not a sign to be seen.

The audience was greatly tickled.

"Now you'll do. W'en a man knows 'ow to laugh, 'e'll make a soldier!"

Thereupon, news arrived. We had been attached to the 4th Corps again, and were to be entrained. What for? Paris. We were to form a part of the troops constituting the mobile defence.

There was general rejoicing. Paris! A certain number of the men came from the city or the suburbs, and even for the others the magic syllables evoked endless delights. What ho! for the picture palaces and the pretty girls, in their first free hour. . . .

It opened up a perspective of repose for everyone, after so much toil.

CHAPTER XI

THE CATHEDRAL

THE notice had reached us at seven o'clock in the morning. At five o'clock in the afternoon we arrived at St. Menehould, of which we saw nothing but the station. At six we were in the train.

Just as it was getting under way—I was looking through the ventilator—there was a sudden panic on the platform. Employees and foremen began to run, flinging their arms up. What was it? There was a noise, I understood. A Taube was flying over the station. The men crowded to the doors. We had no time to distinguish anything. A tremendous explosion flung us on top of each other, and a certain number fell on to the floor of the waggon.

A bomb had just fallen thirty yards from us. There were instant yells and a torrent of smoke. A waggon was pulverised on one of the adjacent lines. Three men killed, and six wounded we heard. And two hours' delay for us.

So we did not get away till night. The beginning of our misfortunes! We had not been going twenty minutes, when we pulled up with a violent jerk. An avalanche of rifles and packs—contusions and confusion.

The lantern was shivered, and went out. A chorus of imprecations exploded in the darkness. We struck

some matches. No serious damage done. Prunelle's face was bleeding, and his glasses were broken. He had a splinter of glass at the edge of his eyelashes. He was lucky. He might have lost an eye.

And outside? We leant out. Shadows were swarming on the ballast, some limping, others frightened. Bouchut had been sent for and came up in a fury shouting at the top of his voice. An orderly was standing in front of each waggon inquiring in a surly voice:

"Any casualties here?"

A commonplace stoppage. The tail carriages had turned over, and the last one which contained among other things the officers' equipments was reduced to atoms, to the great glee of the men.

"We'll lend 'em our tooth-brushes!" said Judsi.

They were not so delighted about it, when they heard that some more men had been killed there, four or five apparently, including Sépot, the chief laboratory man, a good sort, whom everybody loved.

"If this sorter thing goes on," Lamalou said, "there won't be many of us by the time we gets to Paris!"

The stoppage was prolonged. I got out and walked up and down for a little while. The sky was overcast, and there was no moon. I got back. Our train hooted dismally in the darkness, like a ship in distress.

I fell asleep, and we started off again, and went bumping drowsily on our way.

We woke up at dawn to find we had halted again, and were not to go on for an hour at least. The cooks were getting coffee ready. There was an autumnal feeling in the air. It was bitterly cold, and we stamped our feet. It was a characteristic landscape, with its billows of bald hillocks studded with little woods

of conventional shapes. . . . The surroundings of the Camp de Châlons.

De Valpic was shivering and stayed in his waggon. Guillaumin said to me below his breath:

“I wonder—if I’m dreaming?”

“Why?”

“I thought I heard . . .”

“Well?”

“Firing!”

I listened attentively. No, there was nothing. I chaffed him on his hallucinations! Was he profiting by Ravelli’s teaching? Firing indeed! An excellent joke! We had left the enemy more than a hundred and thirty miles behind.

Guillaumin did not persist. The time which had been fixed passed by. Then we were told that we should be there for another two hours.

I left the railway lines and went off into the open fields.

I noticed that our convoy was not the only one which had been stopped there. The black line stretched away as far as eye could see, bordered with a swarm of uniforms, and smoking bonfires. The line was badly blocked.

As I had plenty of time before me, the idea occurred to me of climbing the nearest hill. I followed a chalky path.

I had imagined that this crest was quite near by, and that I should reach it without any difficulty. I only breasted it after twenty minutes of breathless climbing.

A violent north wind lashed me, up there, and dried my perspiration. A vast panorama lay before me: a

series of desolate-looking humps covered the ground, some of them bristling with vine poles, supporting the good Champagne grapes. I took my bearings. Just to the south, I made out the blue ridge of the more important hills, a sort of promontory where I thought an army might have got a good hold. I turned towards the west, a lifeless, colourless stretch of country. The railway line with its telegraph posts disappeared between two low hillocks on that side.

But I thought I could make out the haze and dust rising from a big town. Yes—when I looked harder—there was a purple phantom, the silhouette of a building, hardly discernible in the mist, which little by little grew more distinct—those towers superb in their grace and strength. In my wonder, I named it aloud—Rheims Cathedral.

By some strange chance I had forgotten that this Presence was so near at hand, though on getting into the train that day before, I had vaguely hoped that fate might lead us to it.

My veneration for this most sacred of all shrines dated from my earliest childhood when I had admired a picture of it reproduced in my prayer-book. Abbé Ygonel, my first teacher, had sung the praises of its magnificent harmony in striking terms. I had made of this erection the centre round which gravitated the whole of our history, enchanting as a legend.

I had only once been to see it. I had gone to Rheims for a football match, and before and after the game had left my comrades, and had gone all alone to reflect on the faith which reared the poem of this portal and these towers.

I unconsciously picked up the thread of that meditation again now. The coronation cathedral! It was

there that all the kings whose names were landmarks in our annals, from Philippe-Auguste to Louis XVI. had come, with bowed heads, to receive at the hands of holy men the crown and the unction which made them more than men.

Detached from the present, I once more began to rejoice at this glorious realisation—when my meditation was disturbed by an almost imperceptible wave of sound—a distant echo. A storm beginning or ending? I considered the sky. It was clear and serene. Again there was a stifled rumble. This time I ceased to entertain any doubts. Guillaumin's ears had not played him false. My heart contracted at the first echoes of firing to awaken Champagne. I listened. I wanted to find out . . . the pale horizon guarded its secret. I looked again. The bewildering part of it was that this rumbling seemed to come not from the borders of Argonne, where we had left our trail only yesterday, but from the opposite direction, stretching westwards towards Paris. Was the enemy there? Could it be possible? Already barring this route!

I had mechanically turned my eyes towards the cathedral again. What was I seeking? I believe it was help and comfort, from thee, the representative city,—vision worthy of exalting us.

Why, on the contrary, did this unbounding sadness worm its way into my heart?

What did this proud edifice declare? The power of Royalty, the glory of the Catholicism. . . . The soul of ancient France, which was incarnate in these living stones, had crumbled more quickly in the blast of modern thought, than they had in the wear and tear of time. What bound us, the sons of the twentieth

century, to these traditions for which our ancestors had lived, and piously lavished themselves in such attestations?

Other thoughts obsessed me. Rheims, the heart of the country. This city, which held such an illustrious place in our annals, to-day was threatened, almost lost. How many of our ancient possessions had lately fallen into the hands of the enemy? In 1871, Strassburg and Metz. This time the downfall was more rapid—Flanders and Artois, Picardy, so many treasures and marvels, our patrimony of art and land. The impious tide was advancing. And what fate awaited these august arches, under which our princes had prostrated themselves, the nave which had echoed to the sublime chants of our religion? Would they become a Lutheran church which we should be allowed to look over for the consideration of a few pfennigs? Or was there a worse fate in store for them? I dared not put it into words . . . the crushing presentiment of ravage and crime, fire and sword, devastating this miracle of human hands. I only know that filling my consciousness with the gorgeous picture I secretly bid it farewell.

What was to be done? Resist? No doubt. But so many legions had burst from the Germanic reservoirs. What if it was the barbarians' turn to spread across this corner of the world? An unwavering law—why not? France would perhaps die away—the most civilised nation, ruined by her intelligence, by her scepticism revolting against that which had formed her grandeur. I glanced at the string of stationary trains below. Should we ever get any farther? Were we not more likely to fight where we were? An ironical fate to perish in sight of these towers,

symbols of our whilom virtue, of our repudiated creed!

It must be noticed that I was still convinced that we should all do our utmost duty. We should merit the respect of those who would build on our ruins. I closed my eyes. I almost wished that the hour of our noble passing would strike as soon as possible. It seemed to me that, wounded to the death, I might have closed my eyes, unregretfully, on my race and on myself since we had achieved our destiny.

And yet compunction pursued me among these gloomy speculations. Where was my dauntlessness of yesterday? Why did I suddenly flinch? I sought for the torches which lit up my path. A dazzling beacon stood forth: My love! Jeannine—Jeannine! I still adored her, but what fears interposed themselves, chilling my hope. I counted the days, how many was it, five or six, since I had heard from her. Our one chance of happiness was exposed to so many risks.

What was happening over there? If there were strikes and riots, and the attendant train of outrages? A fair-haired victim . . . ! Would not our future fall to pieces with the future of our nation? Or again—other thoughts assailed me. The turgid surge of uncertainty. Had I deceived myself? Had I not relied too much on a few friendly letters? Had the exalted tone of my missives suddenly alarmed her?

And then I took pity on myself. So that was the only cause of my depression. The delay in our correspondence. But was there any one round me, never mind who it was, more favoured than I? I tried in vain to bring about a reaction.

I went back into the valley. Guillaumin was watching for me and greeted me by asking:

“Well, are you convinced now?”

Yes, it certainly was firing. It could be heard quite distinctly. The men had recognised it, and seemed exhilarated by it.

Judsi announced:

“Boom! There now! We missed the band!”

Primitive souls, who did not know what anxiety was.

CHAPTER XII

PESSIMISM

TOWARDS midday we set off again, but to our surprise, went slowly backwards, accompanied by the shrill blasts of whistles. The line beyond Rheims must obviously be cut, or just about to be cut. Where were they taking us to?

There was a new halt, near a branch line, which lasted for an interminable time. Then we laboriously got under way again. The evening was already falling.

How long did that journey last? Two nights and two days? Or three? It was enough to make one lose all idea of time.

I doubt whether, after leaving Châlons our speed could have exceeded eight miles an hour. Every five minutes we pulled up, sometimes only for a few seconds, sometimes for two or three hours. To begin with the men in command of each truck had instructions to see that no one got out. But as the comedy continued to repeat itself, the orders were soon relaxed. It was better outside than in.

At Châlons and at Troyes we found cold meals prepared for us. In between times the men spread over the neighbouring fields in search of carrots, beans, and potatoes, and generally reaped a fruitful harvest. They hollowed out ovens along the line, but the

train often started off just as the camp-kettles had been put on to the fire. The first time or two, panic ensued, the men seized the material, burning their fingers, and crammed their mouths with half-cooked vegetables.

But they gradually got to take things more calmly. If the train wanted to do a bolt, let it, by all means! They'd catch it up all right. Or if not they would jump on to the next one that came along, that was all! There was a procession of convoys on our down line.

The most hilarious merriment spread from one end of the chain to the other. It was occasionally chilled by meeting an ambulance train carrying its terrible load of suffering. We were shunted and the other passed us. It was heart-rending, and unpleasant too, to have to stay in the wake of it, where there floated an unsavory smell. But the rest of the time—high jinks! The *poilus* had taken a fancy to this fantastic excursion. Peasants did a trade in eatables along the line. We bought eggs, cheese, jam, and black puddings and sausages from them—good cheer, in fact. And wine most of all. There was a great run on some frothy wine of an inferior quality sold at two francs a bottle. The men clubbed together and there were great drinking bouts which ended in some of them being distinctly "binged."

It was no use trying to interfere. The N. C. O's were giving way everywhere. Some of them even joined in. Among our lot I at least succeeded in putting into force this rule: that whoever felt squeamish, should not get back into the truck, where he would make everyone uncomfortable. It was strictly observed: some of these excellent fellows

meekly dragged their wish to vomit along the ballast for a livelong day.

I was far from partaking in this atmosphere of gaiety, and was, on the contrary, bored and depressed. I did not get out half-a-dozen times, but stayed in our truck in almost complete isolation. Chance had separated me from Guillaumin on this journey, and thrown me with Langlois, who was not a very inspiring companion.

De Valpic was feeling the effects of his recent fatigue, and lay down the whole time. Humel twice came to pay me a short visit, unknown to the rest of the "set." Henriot was nowhere to be seen.

I have said that we stopped for a moment at Troyes where we turned off on to the main line, Belfort-Paris. We soon saw the effect of it in the change of speed. Two of our gay spirits again took advantage of a halt, to rag in the fields. The train started off at full speed without whistling. We did not see them again until two days later.

We arrived at Pantin at night. The men's persistent gaiety made me singularly cross, and I was much relieved when the captain lost his temper and exacted silence. We detrained in pitch darkness. All the lamps in the station had been put out for fear of Taubes and Zeppelins.

I longed and feared to learn what turn things had taken. I questioned a foreman who confided in me:

"You're lucky, you're the last to arrive! To-morrow the system won't be working. It's already cut at Meaux."

They hurried us along the platform, weighed down like human live-stock. On leaving the station

we turned into an unlighted avenue, and marched for half an hour or fifty minutes.

The men demanded a halt.

Everyone was so firmly convinced that we were being brought back to rest here. We would have given anything to lie down, if only on bad straw. Our backs were sore all over from those seventy-six hours in the train.

The streets were deserted. At long intervals there was a sentry, or patrol-party. We went on, half dozing. With my head nodding, I urged myself on to certain arguments, which were comparatively reassuring. Don't throw the helve after the hatchet. A besieged town is not a captured town. Paris, in 1870, had held out for more than four months. The defensive works in those days did not approach those of to-day.

Henriot was walking beside me. I unbarred my thoughts to him. He retorted:

"Oh rot! They'll get in as easy as look at it!"

"Do you really know anything definite about it?" I asked, a little nonplussed.

"I know as much as everyone else! Nothing's ready. The forts in the west are not worth a pin. They won't hold out any more than those at Namur!"

He added:

"And then you know, when we no longer think of anything but defending ourselves . . . !"

There were two lanterns in the middle of the road, and forms coming and going. It was an intrenching party—some Zouaves digging a piece of trench, and a machine-gun was pointed there.

Judsi turned round.

"A bit beforehand, ain't they?"

Their zeal was rather overdone! That was the general impression. I, on the contrary, felt that it might come in useful no later than to-morrow.

I repeated to myself Henriot's half-finished remark, "When we no longer think of anything but defending ourselves . . .!" And I followed the thought to its conclusion. I remembered the teaching of my military education, a certain crude phrase in the regulations, "A passive defensive is doomed to certain defeat!"

Pray what were we doing but running to shut ourselves up in a camp? How many sad precedents there were for that? Metz, Port Arthur, Adrianople . . . I recalled the changed attitude of those of my companions who were capable of reasoning. De Valpic, prostrate. Was it due only to weariness? Guillaumin was taciturn and reserved, and the officers silent. The captain? We had seen very little of him—once or twice gloomily gnawing his moustache. What baleful influence was in the air? I was suddenly suffocated by it.

Where were they taking us now? It was Prunelle who put us on the track. He recognised the country, it was in the neighbourhood of Neuilly-Plaisance. There was a tiny village there where he went every Saturday evening, and quite near by, a topping place for fishing. May I be hung if he did not begin to prate of perch and roach?

There was a halt at last. I took a turn. A shadow was silhouetted in front of me:

"Sergeant!"

"Who goes there?"

Oh, I recognised him . . .

"That you, Donnadiou?"

It was my corporal, the voluntary casualty of Mangiennes!

"I've come back, Sergeant," he said. "Sergeant . . ."

He stopped, choking . . .

"Did you tell the others?"

"Tell them what?"

"How I . . . was wounded?"

"No." I replied coldly. "I told no one."

My glance mechanically sought his hand. He explained:

"Two fingers gone, that's all! I've asked them not to discharge me, as I can hold my rifle! I've been waiting for you here for two days. . . ."

He began again:

"Sergeant, I was watching for you . . . I wanted to see you before the others . . . because . . . because . . ."

He swallowed:

"If the thing had got about . . . I should have put a bullet through my head!"

His tone was abrupt, and sincere. A man who would recover himself. Why could I not find a hearty word for him?

"Where were you looked after?"

"At the field hospital. . . . A dozen or so out of the company were there."

"Do you know what became of . . . ?"

He read my thoughts . . .

"Sergeant Frémont?"

"Frémont, yes?"

"He died . . . in two days. They couldn't move him."

I left him. Little Frémont dead! It seemed

impossible, and yet I had foreseen it. The tragic destiny weighed on us all! Again I saw him, this comrade of my youth, seated on the bench in the garden, beside his love, with the clear eyes. . . .

I went back to my companions. Guillaumin and De Valpic were together, and Humel not far away. I called him, and told them the sad news, in an undertone.

“It’s quite certain then?”

Humel fixed his eyes, in which I read anxiety and terror, on me. Poor boy! He, especially, needed a comforting word. I could not furnish it. We were all four silent.

Then De Valpic tried to dispel the gloom, by referring to some incident or other on the journey. He adopted a joking tone. But his strength failed him, his cough put an end to his story. And the order came to start again.

We met again during the next halt. No one had the heart to say a word. Each one of us felt capable of mastering his own distress, but if they all came to be fused and strengthened by each other, there would be nothing for it but to sob. . . .

CHAPTER XIII

A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER

WE were billeted in a school, a pleasant change after the wretched holes we had been given in Argonne. I slept until it was broad daylight.

When I awoke, our *poilus* had been up for a long time. Judsi was parting his hair, and talking of asking for leave to go and see his lady friend. I went on lying in my corner for quite a long time. I was haunted by the gloomy speculations which had attacked me the day before. I thought of you, Jeannine, and wondered if you were thinking of me. . . .

De Valpic appeared at the door and glanced round the room. He caught sight of me and came up.

"Good morning, old chap!"

He sat down beside me.

"This Paris air does buck one up. I'm in the 'pink' this morning!"

He coughed.

"And what about you?"

"Not so dusty."

He continued:

"You did look cut up last night. Directly I got up, I said to myself, now it's my turn to go and cheer him up!"

I smiled.

"Awfully decent of you, but did I need it as much as all that?"

There was a moment's silence, while his warm gaze probed me. Then he put his hand on my shoulder:

"We aren't getting letters," he said, "but it doesn't mean that they have forgotten us, old man!"

He had accentuated his words, with the intuition of a generous heart. How cleverly he had seen through the almost unconscious yet ever-present motive of my bitterness. I hoped he would continue—but he did not force my reserve. Simply and quietly he began to open his heart to me again, as he had the other day. I learnt that his betrothed was named Anne-Marie, and he told me her family name too, an illustrious one, as I had supposed. The last card he had had from her had been sent from Laon, he said. . . . Yes, she was down there with a detachment of nurses.

De Valpic spoke slowly, in his expressive, caressing voice. He told me what strength and stoical tenacity of purpose he had drawn more than once, from the tender daily letter. Without this assistance he would have faltered and fallen at the beginning. He considered that now was the time, when he, like me, had been deprived of all news, for so long, to stand fast, to show himself worthy of her, to put forth all the strength which she had inculcated into him.

It was a confidence which seemed to prompt mine, or take it for granted, a new bond between us. All he told me of his fiancée, I could attribute to Jeannine. Valiant children, they were both alike in their attachment to us, in their task of inspiration. I too invoked a certain passage in one of the recent letters, buttoned up in my tunic, where courage and patience were

preached to me, where I was implored never to despair of happiness. Stick to it, then, by way of homage, in proof of manly devotion. I fervently forbade myself to let despondency get a hold over me. Ah! If only I could have made enthusiasm my daily bread.

"I've just been writing," continued De Valpic. "Sent from here, perhaps it will arrive. Won't you imitate me?"

I asked him to excuse me for a moment while I scrawled a few lines. I told Jeannine that fate had deigned to answer my prayer, and bring me near to her . . . Nothing more than a smiling testimony to our faith and hope.

On reading it over I laughed and said:

"Well, if she is not cheered up by that!"

"You know," he said, "that Paris is showing a most admirable spirit."

"Really? How can you judge of it?"

"Come along!"

He gave me a hand by which to pull myself up. We went out. In the street I was at once struck by all the windows decked with flags flapping in the wind, the serenity written on the faces of the people walking about, the tranquil hum. I had seen the city look like this during the mobilisation.

"Has there been—a victory?" I murmured.

"It will come all in good time!" De Valpic said gaily. "Don't be in such a hurry!"

Bells were beginning to ring.

"It's Sunday," he continued. "What luck to be here on a Sunday!"

We took a few steps. It was a clear, spring-like morning; a gentle breeze made the sunlit tree-tops

quiver. A troop of little children ran up brandishing sticks and spades.

"Hurrah for the soldiers!" they cried.

They had the attractive, wide-awake faces common to Paris boys. They nudged each other.

"It's the 3rd . . . just look!"

"My big bruvver's in the 302nd."

Some of them gazed into our eyes saying:

"'Ad a 'ard time, 'aven't yer, but we're sure to wop 'em, ain't we?"

"Wop 'em—rather!" De Valpic retorted joyously.

The passers-by smiled at us, or gave us a friendly wave of the hand. The City greeted us, not as her saviours—Paris did not admit that she was in any danger,—but simply as good children who had suffered for her sake.

The rare trams, which were running, began to turn out numbers of Sunday excursionists. A great many had come with their families either on foot, or bicycling, to enjoy the air of their beloved suburb. Not one of them showed the least trace of terror. They were marvellously light-hearted. It was amusing to see the fathers pointing out the preparations for defence to their offspring, the trenches and barricades made of trees placed at intervals along the avenues, and supplying the explanations in a serious or amused tone of voice. The little brats enjoyed the unusual sight. Their eyes were often turned skywards, a Taube was the only thing wanting to make their joy complete.

De Valpic pressed my arm. He was triumphant.

"Well, what do you say to it?"

Two pretty young women, who were crossing the road, came up to us. They were attractive and

distinguished-looking. They both had baskets on their arms, and we noticed their brassards. They gracefully offered us cigarettes, cakes, and packets of sweets tied up with ribbons. I helped myself discreetly. De Valpic would only accept a flower, which he stuck in his cap.

"And what about your comrades?"

We called Bouillon who was passing. He was still only half-clothed, as he had been washing at a fountain. At last he made up his mind to it and they made a great fuss over "the brave *poilu*."

Having stuffed him with dainties, they began to question him. Where did he come from? From Paris, really! And what quarter? Grenelle. One of them exclaimed that she lived in that part too. Bouillon was stammering in his embarrassment.

I took it upon myself to give them "Marie's" address. The young woman promised to go and see her, no later than to-morrow, and she would take something for the baby.

I think that they had recognised De Valpic and myself as belonging to their world. Just as they were about to go on their way, they turned round once more.

"Perhaps you have some letters to send?"

"Yes, indeed."

We gave them the missives.

"Good luck to you!"

They held out their hands to us, with a pretty gesture.

Directly they had gone, I said to De Valpic:

"What we ought to have done was to ask them for some papers!"

"What does it matter?"

He accosted the first passer-by, and then went on to the next group. His courtesy stood him in good stead. In five minutes he had collected six or seven newspapers, of that day or the day before. We went in again to revel in this literature.

Our eyes grew wet with joy, at the very first glance.

I have spoken of my obstinate fears concerning the interior peril. They soon vanished. There was no confusion at all.

The Government was intact, and had become greater and more sanctified. All the different parties were working together. The alterations in the Ministry had no other significance. It was a Sacred Union. The words exactly described it.

I fell upon the *communiqués*. That day's said that the enemy was continuing his change of front in the south-east. . . .

That of the day before mentioned that Rheims and La Ferté had been reached. . . . That was no news to us!

Most of the space was devoted to the enormous advance by the Russians, a piece of news which astounded, and overjoyed us. What fun has since been made of the wave of hope let loose by these victories at the beginning, of the naïve enthusiasm of the crowds, and the tale of the Cossacks being only a few days' march from Berlin? Wrongly, in my opinion. The benefit derived from such illusions will never be exaggerated. Our salvation was built on them and by them,—by the fervour aroused in the veins of each Frenchman, the fierce resolution to strain every faculty, to fight side by side, to hold out until the mighty flood of Slavs, pouring out of the Steppes, should overwhelm everything. . . .

And besides, they were not all chimeras. There were already some definite results. Oriental Prussia was invaded, and "Altenstein" and "Gumbinnen"—the censor was silent on the subject of "Thannenberg." And then, at the other extremity of this front, the triumphs in Galicia, the occupation of Lemberg, which had just been announced, and endless booty and trophies!

Farther on other flourishes were sounded. There was an avalanche of details on the marvellous exploits of the Serbians—their success at Lonitza, dated from the week before—down to the splendid Montenegrins who were said to be threatening Cattaro.

What could be more impressive, too, than the firmness of the English resolution! The expeditionary force, coming over in numbers, day after day; Lord Kitchener's allusion to the "formidable factor"—everyone knew what he meant by that.

Above all, the solemn compact made by the Three Powers not to sign a separate peace.

And then what life and courage there was in the style of all these articles. They would always be read and re-read for the edification of the people. There was no sign of depression or giving way. Nothing but a superb confidence in the destiny of the country. They approved the action of the Ministry, frankly and completely. It was an excellent move to take the Government to Bordeaux, as a measure of prudence. Gallièni was to replace Michel. Well if the latter submitted, he must be imitated. There were sober commentaries on the strategical situation. The errors and defeats were admitted, but public opinion convinced that further mistakes were being guarded against, was not affected by them. The possi-

bility of an attack against the Intrenched Camp was recognised, but there were strong arguments tending to prove that it would fail utterly. There were interviews with combatants, wounded, and prisoners; noble traits, and heroic sayings. In fact, one might say that the atmosphere was one of cocksureness and joviality. The press and the nation were attaining to the fine temper of the *poilus*.

Here and there anonymous pieces of information or an article, signed by a celebrated writer or politician, were conspicuous—all great successes. It was not my smallest surprise. These people, worthy of their reputation, of their readers, of the Moment! Supple geniuses moving without effort at the zenith of eloquence.

Why quote any names? They were superbly-tuned instruments, all vibrating on the same note, taking their part in the pæon, even to a certain divine flute-player, whom I had formerly admired as an artist, without considering him sincere, even without always relishing his disdainful irony—I was struck by the direct, earnest style which he suddenly displayed. I felt my soul thrill in unison with his great soul, which he unveiled with a quiver.

De Valpic and I devoured the papers, and handed them on to each other.

“Just read that!”

I know quite well that we brought the most credulous state of mind to our reading—I was even tempted to upbraid myself with it. The world of the press was well known to me! It was turned on at a word of command. Even in face of all likelihood and reason. Perhaps all the probable sorrows of the hour were being hidden from us.

De Valpic read my thoughts:

"As long as it goes down . . .!" he said.

It was true enough. They were happy lies to judge by their fruits. If those who traced these lines despaired at heart, all the more honour to them. . . . Who could thank them enough for the manly assurance they had inscribed on the face of the crowd? Could I not feel the benefit of their encouragement upon myself?

My companion looked at his watch.

"I must leave you."

"Where are you going?"

He smiled:

"Will you come with me? There is a mass at nine o'clock, just near by."

CHAPTER XIV

HIGH STRATEGY

I WAS going out into the yard, with my three or four papers spread out in my hand, when I heard myself called. I stopped. It was Captain Ribet.

"Newspapers are prohibited!" he said.

I was standing at attention. I gazed at him. Was he joking? In peace time, I knew they were not allowed. But to-day! Was it a pet fad of his? Or else were there special instructions?

His features relaxed. He continued:

"Will you lend me one?"

I handed him the whole bundle.

"Allow me . . ." he said. "Just a glance."

He ran through the first page, and was just going to turn over.

I made bold to say:

"There's nothing so exhilarating as that reading, I consider, sir! I confess I was thinking of letting my men profit by it . . ." He cut me short:

"I understand, I understand you. You're a good sort, Dreher! Two or three of you have turned out to be extraordinarily useful! I was a little bit prejudiced against you young *bourgeois*. I thought you would be selfish, and not care a rap about your work or anything else. I was mistaken."

He added:

"I wish all your comrades were like you!"

I opened my mouth but he stopped me.

"I know what I'm talking about. I'm quite well aware of it. Look here, only this morning I had a talk with Descroix and Humel. I've warned them of one thing, and that is, that if during the first engagement their men flinch . . . Ah! I'm not going to stand any nonsense! It'll be a case of summary justice, I can tell you!"

I put in a few words on Humel's behalf.

"Yes, he's getting himself in hand again, since he's had something to do with you others!"

Bless the man! Nothing escaped him. He continued:

"As for Playoust, nothing on earth will induce me to have him in my firing-line again. I'm going to arrange to have him sent to the ammunition-train, but I shall warn them to keep an eye on him there!"

I said nothing as I felt slightly embarrassed. It was certainly the first time that the company commander had lingered in tête-à-tête with one of his N. C. O's. Ravelli, who was a few yards off, must think I was getting a wiggling. I tried to escape.

"Stop a minute," said Ribet, "if I'm not boring you . . ."

He smiled.

"And stand at ease, Dreher!"

I moved my left leg, and smiled in my turn.

Then he began to talk to me in an unexpectedly familiar tone—this man whom I had thought so proud, so incapable of confiding in any one. He told me his whole history, how when quite small he had always longed to be a soldier, how he had been kept back by an illness, and had failed for St. Cyr (I had always

thought he had been through it), why he had enlisted. . . . He loyally reported all his disappointments, and mortifications. It was the last trade in peace time. He appealed to me to corroborate this statement from the knowledge gained from my brother whom I had just lost. Oh, the slow advancement, the insufficient pay, the spirit of jealousy and tyranny . . . !

He made a speech for the prosecution. The greatest part of the army was a mass of laziness, lies, and intrigue. There were two ways of rising from the ranks: the military school, where hard work did not succeed except when combined with push (except in regard to successes with the fair sex), and the Colonies. He had got himself sent to the Soudan, as an ambitious young subaltern, but at the end of a few months his liver had become inflamed. Weeks of fever, and a long martyrdom at the hospital at Brazzaville had followed, and he had finally been sent back to France with the advice never to set foot in Africa again. It had meant that his life was wrecked—that he must grow old in the dreary atmosphere of little garrison towns.

His tone grew still more bitter when he described the utter boredom, the flat distractions, the lack of any intellectual milieu, and beyond that the moral subjection, the physical overwork. The machine was worn out before its time, one became fit for nothing.

I could not help asking him:

“Why . . . can't you clear out in time?”

“Why? Because when once you're in it, you stay there. Made a captain after fifteen years' service, I waited ten more for—can you guess what? A trumpery bit of rubbish, the military cross!”

He continued:

"When I retired, I was used up, done! The time for aspiring to something higher was past, or at all events for the realisation of it. I was made a tax-collector. That was all that was left for me!"

Yes, theirs was an odd fate, I thought, the peacetime soldiers, who come out and mature, acquire lace and age, and end by disappearing without having realised that for which they imagined they were born.

I said in order to console him:

"But since you're fighting to-day . . ."

He drew himself up:

"Exactly. To-day I'm fighting. I am taking risks, I obey and command; I am, in fact, of some use. At my age, if I had been in the reserve, they'd have left me at the dépôt!"

He tossed his head.

"It's true. Taking everything into account, I don't think I regret anything."

His eyes shone.

Of some use! Yes, indeed, this company commander, who had three hundred men in his charge, and played his part conscientiously, had used and not abused the power placed in his hands. It was the eternal swing of the pendulum. Greatness after Servitude!

He went on with his confidences.

"You'll laugh at me! The things I was keenest about were the studies which form the crown of our art—strategy and tactics. To handle masses of men, and face those many-sided problems—the offensive, the pursuit, the retreat. . . . I worked a lot on my own account. There are some questions on which I don't think . . . any one could catch me out."

He was working himself up.

Fancy holding the fate of a section in your hands! Or being commander-in-chief on a day when the victory he has prepared comes to pass.

At this point a little irony crept into my thoughts and chilled my admiration for him. What was to become of all these ambitions of a company commander in this fine "dug-out" from St. Maixent? The idea of exploiting his mania occurred to me. I might get some interesting information out of him. . . .

I looked at him.

"Well, what do you think of the situation at the moment?"

Did he guess my secret tendency to sarcasm? A struggle seemed to be going on in him. Mistrust obviously won the day. He would not lay himself open to ridicule. He treated me to the usual commonplace. We must hold on, and leave the Russians time to throw all their weight into the balance. It was a necessity for the Germans to finish us off quickly.

"Then you don't think we ought to meet their attack?"

"That depends!"

"Well then, do you think our retreat is nearly over?"

"Ask Joffre!"

I sounded him:

"Some people consider that we ought to go and wait for the enemy on the Loire."

That was too much for him. He cried:

"Oh, no, no. That would be absolutely idiotic. I know there was some talk of it!"

"How far, then?"

He hesitated:

"I hope some day we may be in a position to take the offensive again!"

I looked up.

"Yes," I said, "because at the moment . . ."

"Well?"

"What are we doing?"

He scrutinised my face.

"Follow up your idea."

"We are shutting ourselves into a camp."

"Does that distress you?"

"I may be a bad judge."

He twirled his moustache.

"Really! You too, you too! You look at things like that?"

I had him—I had led him on to the point from which I knew he would launch out.

"If the worst came to the worst, and Paris was stormed, there would only be one thing for us, the troops collected here, to do. That would be to stick in the trenches covering the approach to the forts, and be killed, down to the last man! . . . For that matter I think they'd be in a bit of a hole with our army on their flank. But that's not at all the position. For four days, Dreher, four days you understand, their new objective has been visible. They are inclining towards the south-east. They are set on surrounding all our forces in the field. Under these circumstances, I think—it seems to me—that a decisive movement . . ."

This time he threw restraint to the winds. He began by explaining all he had been able to follow of the operations since the beginning. In a lump, of course, but how much I valued that first sight I had had of things as a whole, at a time when I was sighing

after light from the depths of my ignorance. It was in vain that I had instinctively put myself on guard against the pretensions of an officer in a subordinate position. I was forced to admire the masterly way in which he stated the facts, the precision and lucidity of his words, which would have made of him a remarkable professor of military history. He summed up for me, in a few words, the action in the North which until then had been shrouded in a thick mist for me. Our premature offensive, the strength of the German right under Von Kluck exceeding all expectations—our English Allies overcome in spite of heroic efforts—the enemy's wing set in motion and hurled towards Paris by forced marches which it was impossible to hinder in spite of terrible sacrifices—our men falling back, fighting day and night, on to the outskirts of the capital. That was last week's balance sheet. To-day the enemy had given up the idea of Paris, provisionally and was applying the new principle: the search for, and the annihilation of, the hostile armies in the field. It was a far-reaching conception. Just think of the gigantic forces they had hurled into Lorraine too, which had just forced us back in a few days from Sarrebourg and Morhange to the St. Dié-Nancy front. It was a colossal enveloping movement. Our front pierced towards Neufchâteau, as the principal German mass fell back by Châlons—our communications cut, that meant all our forces in the east, and the whole system of our fortified towns caught at one haul, three-quarters of our strength destroyed, the war virtually over.

"Then?" I said panting in spite of myself.

"We have a chance. Will they know how to make use of it? I believe so—First of all, our right must

hold out. Castelnau is down there, he is the only man who has held his own. Then you see Von Kluck is clearly leaving Paris on one side. He does not set much store by the place, only sees it in the stake of victory. That is perhaps a mistake, perhaps *the* mistake. Perhaps our one object was to get him to make that mistake!"

He took a deep breath:

"Dreher, listen to this! If we were in the camp in force—and why shouldn't we be?—if we had had time to concentrate several corps there, a hundred thousand men say, which I believe is the case—if we threw ourselves on their flank, imprudently uncovered—if at that precise instant our other armies made headway against them—if Von Kluck were suddenly to find himself wedged in a vice . . ."

The captain pulled up short. Was he afraid of having said too much, of having ventured too far in his bold inferences?

He went on:

"However, they may be tempted to keep us as a last resource."

But he could not bear this idea, and refuted it himself instantly:

"No, a thousand times no! A bad calculation. All the forces on the spot, and at the right moment! That was what was wanted!"

He interrupted himself again, with beads of perspiration on his forehead . . . and suddenly said in a detached tone of voice:

"I say that to you, but I know nothing, nothing. The staffs are the only judges. Are our numbers sufficient? Is our combination assured, and the enemy's compromised?"

An aeroplane passed by. The captain raised his arm:

"Is it that bird that is bringing decisive information?"

"Or the order to attack?" I murmured.

He was silent, and I could get no more out of him but idle generalities, but I read in his eyes, and face his approbation of my wish, the conformity of our desire.

CHAPTER XV

A WORD IN SEASON

I WAS in a state of great excitement when I left him—a mixture of hope and anguish aroused by the ascendancy of his words. They had been so clear and categorical, too. I could so vividly imagine the movement of salvation within our reach. The German right, harassed by a dizzy offensive, no doubt experiencing difficulties in the replenishment of supplies, after having lightly embarked on this broad movement of conversion—with us as a living menace on its flank, well supported by the camp (were our numbers large enough? That was the chief point), well rested and provided with ammunition . . . what a lot of trumps we should hold in the advantage of taking them by surprise; the consciousness of the justice of our cause, the strength drawn from contact with our Mother City.

I was possessed with the idea that a decision was urgent. Was not this the day and the hour, even the minute, that historians would designate to all eternity as that in which our supreme chance of victory occurred?

My heart was beating madly. I tried in vain to calm myself by the usual reflections. I could so well picture the alternative being laid before the governor of Paris. Either to reserve his army in view of the

probable siege, or else to hurl it into the furnace down to the last battalion.

It was a formidable initiative. The fate of the country in his hands! All my being was strained, almost to breaking point, towards the side of boldness. I would have given ten years of my life that this man's heart might be well tempered.

I walked feverishly through the streets wherever chance led me, looking for someone to talk to. I met De Valpic, but he was exhausted and was going to rest.

Guillaumin had been warned for orderly duty at the Town Hall. I went to see him, but did not get much out of him as he was absorbed in his duties. It was a sight to warm the heart, this string of inhabitants, coming, each one of them, to offer to have soldiers billeted on them.

On leaving there, I went to have a look at my men who were cleaning themselves up and mending their clothes—a laudable care for their personal appearance, and a way of passing time. According to the general opinion, we should be there for some time.

I continued my walk and extended its area. I came to a vague piece of ground bordered by a hedge. I distinguished the murmur of voices behind it, and caught sight of some uniforms. Someone exclaimed:

“Take care!”

I showed myself. Then they laughed.

“Halloa! That you, Dreher?”

Five or six of my comrades from the fifth battalion were seated there in a circle, Ladmiraute and Miquel among others; Fortin, too. I was delighted. It will be remembered that I had not seen him since the incident at the “Globe.”

I went and sat down beside him and began to talk

to him in a cordial tone. Idiotic, the fuss that had been made! Did they still continue to worry him?

"Not a bit."

He spoke rather coldly. Miquel intervened.

"Rather not! He's in my platoon. I let him off the troublesome fatigues."

The conversation seemed to be hanging fire. I asked:

"What were you talking about when I arrived?"

"Oh, nothing much—nothing at all interesting. You got any news?"

I was stupidly inspired to tell them of little Frémont's death.

"Poor boy!" sighed Laraque.

"Whose turn is it now?" Fortin remarked.

Silence fell again. I said:

"You don't seem very enthusiastic here."

"Not much reason to be."

"Oh, come!"

Fortin gave a start, but his neighbour nudged him, saying:

"That your opinion?"

There were smiles. My reputation as a scoffer was indeed well established. Fortin, without addressing me in particular, murmured:

"I wonder if there are still any optimists left?"

"Of course," I said. "Myself for one."

He gazed at me, refusing to take me seriously; then said, in a tired voice:

"I am stating results. The war has been going on for just five weeks and where have we got to? We've been beaten everywhere and thrown back on our final redoubt. The amount that was said about defending the least particle of ground foot by foot,

till the last extremity! The extremity has soon come. Let's establish the balance: Lille, Arras, Amiens, Beauvais, St. Quentin, Mézières, Rheims—by this time probably Meaux and Châlons; possibly Nancy! A quarter of France invaded. No, I tell you, there's nothing to be done. They were ready; that's all. They knew what they wanted."

I interrupted him, quivering all over. It was my turn now to copy Guillaumin.

"Then, according to you, everything is lost?"

"Oh," he said, "the men are first rate. There's nothing lost by admitting that. They will probably hold out to the end, in face of all hope, for honour's sake."

"And you'll be one of the first to do so," said Miquel.

"Just like everyone else. It's in our blood. I see our line of resistance on the Loire, then on the Garonne. The wretched government will have to move house again."

"How you run on! And Paris?"

"It's lucky they didn't bear straight down on it. They'd be entering it at this very moment."

"Perhaps they had some reason . . ."

"Bah!"

"All our armies on their flank."

"Our poor armies! A lot there is left of them!"

"Really? Look at our regiment. Is it at full strength? Have its numbers been made up to what they were at the start? Yes. Well, it's the same thing everywhere. All the dépôts have supplied men. As we fell back we recuperated our reserves while, as long as their communications go on extending, their front loses in density. They are no longer so im-

mentally superior to us in numbers as they were at the beginning, and their movements are anything but free. Maubeuge was not taken yesterday."

"But it will be to-day."

"One day gained."

"Oh, yes! That's a good joke, that idea about holding out."

"Holding out, exactly. We've got to the thirty-fifth day of war. According to the German plans, we were to be annihilated by that date. Are we? No. There are all kinds of things lacking."

"All kinds?" Fortin said ironically.

"Our line is not broken anywhere; we have only wheeled. You spoke of Nancy just now. They'd better come and take it from Castelnaud! Do you really want to know what I think? I think they're the ones that are in the soup."

A buzz of scepticism greeted my declaration. I continued:

"First of all, here they are forced to take how many?—three or four army corps back to the East."

"To the East? Why?"

"Against the Russians."

"Where did you get hold of that idea?"

"In the papers."

"Are they to be had?"

"If you look for them."

I shook them.

"You're not curious! You know nothing, then? Not even you, Fortin? Really? Nothing of our Allies' successes?"

He raised himself.

"But look here, are these tales serious?"

"What d'you mean? Their advance exceeds all expectations."

I summed up the triple Slav offensive in Prussia, Galicia, and Bosnia.

They seemed to doubt my statements. I abruptly pulled a newspaper out of my pocket, spread it out, and read out the headlines of the articles. I called their attention to the illustration, a mighty Cossack pointing his lance at Berlin.

They pressed round me, crushing me, their hands seizing the paper and their eyes devouring the contents. When their first thirst was allayed I continued in the most serious tone:

"There's a first motive for confidence. For the second? . . . But you've only got to look at these Sunday crowds. Talk to them and you'll soon see. We are seeing Paris at her most noble aspect. Don't you realise that we are living through the most glorious days in our history? For the first time we have avoided weakening ourselves by political convulsions in the face of danger. That will save us, simply."

Some of them nodded in approval. Fortin tried to weaken the impression I had made.

"The papers say what they choose."

I attacked him.

"And what about you—what are your statements based on?"

"I should be only too glad," he protested, "to see things take a turn for the better."

"No, you don't wish for our success," I cried. "Or at least not ardently enough. You are the victim of your standpoint. For months now you have been repeating in your lectures and articles that you know

Germany inside out; that she is powerful and irresistible; that the future of Europe lies with her while we merely represent a past about to vanish. Ever since the beginning of the campaign you've been waiting, with bowed head, for your prophecies to be fulfilled. I can imagine you warning your companions that 'that will not last,' whenever any good news arrives, and saying, 'I told you so!' at each setback. And if you regret it as a Frenchman, which is quite possible, it's quite obvious that as a philosophical witness you unconsciously rejoice. You misrepresent the reality. Your vision is warped. You immediately look at the worst side when endless possibilities are open to you. Do you wonder that the future looks black to you in such circumstances? But the most annoying part is that you demoralise those around you. I implore you to make an effort. Try to be impartial and honest. Consider all the signs in our favour to-day."

I continued. I was speaking quickly, overcoming the obscure embarrassment which usually paralyses me, when it is a question of holding the attention of an audience. I let my conviction burst forth. I poured out the arguments I had collected in an imperious flood. By expressing them I discovered in them fresh truth and amplitude. Far from becoming involved and detracting from each other, they grouped themselves into harmonious chains.

I extolled the morale of the troops; that morale at which we all expressed ourselves surprised, and Fortin most of all. Surprised? Why not say exalted? Behind us the nation gave proof of its indomitable spirit. I laid stress upon the superiority of our generals; the young blood introduced in high places,

the incapables placed on the retired list; and the prodigious problem represented in a retreat of those dimensions when the whole line must keep in touch, and never cease for an instant to harass the enemy.

I suddenly shifted my ground, and reverted to the international situation which I ventured to depict in broad and summary terms. The Triple Alliance disintegrated. Austria beaten and occupied in decimating her Tchek troops. Italy, non-committal, had perhaps already made up her mind to intervene, but on our side to save her children in the Trentino, and in Trieste; the Balkans, waiting silently in the darkness, like a bird of prey, for the death rattle of the first to be conquered, to claim a share of the carcass. Turkey keeping at a respectful distance. On our side the Russian giant only inaugurating the effort which he was capable of increasing for months and years. The English contributing their incontestable mastery of the seas, the omnipotence of their gold, the land forces fed by their insular and colonial reservoirs. Belgium and Serbia, little nations with unquenchable spirits—yonder on the other surface of the globe, the Land of the Rising Sun throwing its weight into the balance. The world, in fact, in coalition against the insolent race which aimed at hegemony without in any way justifying it.

At first they had listened to me with a smile as if it were an excellent joke. Little by little the incredulous curl to their lips died away. Fortin repeatedly punctuated my remarks with "Exactly, exactly!"

A last allusion on Laraque's part to my reputation for "having people on" fell flat.

I gaily ventured on new developments. I lost sight of myself. I became really inspired. It intoxicated

me to attain to such unlooked-for ardour. I do not remember quite what I said. I know that my comrades, with half-opened lips and eyes fixed on mine, hung on my words, and that for the first time in my life I endured all these gazes bent on me without false shame.

Our side was that of Justice, of international fidelity, and respect for treaties, of Morality, written or unwritten. I was not afraid of bringing up these popular commonplaces, and I clearly dissociated our cause, even from that of the Allies. We were the only nation with completely unsullied hands, and peace-loving hearts. We were the only ones who, drawn into the struggle against our will, in bearing the heaviest burden, were fighting for our very existence. I asked them to think what the French mind meant to the world, what would be missing in the progress of humanity in the future if we let ourselves be overcome. We were not only defending our immediate interests, but a certain smiling Reason, a certain completed and definite genius whose secret to-day we alone possessed. It was a decisive conflict. Fortin was right about that. If we were conquered again this time, we should always be. It would mean that our name would be scratched off the list of leading nations, our colonies sacrificed, three or four provinces torn from our Mother-country, who in future would fall a prey, every ten years, to the appetites of the conqueror.

The end of France was what the aggressors wanted. To extinguish this blazing hearth of liberty and light, to smother this ringing voice continually calling the nations to the realisation of themselves, and to those in power to respect the down-trodden.

Ah, my friends, what an hour it was to strain our faculties, to prove ourselves worthy of our humbler brothers who were showing such self-sacrifice and instinctive heroism! We others ought to be strengthened by our education. I dared to plead the memories of the soil which bore us. I evoked the rolling uplands of Champagne where we had lingered yesterday and where we might return again, summoned by the melancholy accents of the guns. How many battles had been fought and won there by men of our blood! They were the Catalonian fields, where, at the dawn of our history, the hordes of barbarians already issuing from Germany had spent themselves against the vigour of the Gauls, the allies of Aetius. And was it not just a few miles away, on the hills and in the valleys which to-morrow's prodigious engagement would perhaps gain for the enemy, that the astonishing episodes in the French campaign had been enacted, a hundred years ago! Champaubert, Sesanne, Montmirail, and again Meaux and Moret. It was there that our fathers, children of sixteen, the last class eligible for mobilisation, had held out for weeks, flying from one valley to another, inflicting defeat after defeat on an enemy five times more numerous, on the European coalition! And we, after a long peace, well-taught, well-led, animated with the breath of civism—should we not find a way to hurl back over our frontiers the enemy whom Napoleon had trodden under his heel?

I was afraid to end up with a high-flown tirade. I uttered my closing sentences in a softer voice, as if out of breath. I was still quivering and, with my eyes on the ground, I threw some pebbles from one hand to the other, backwards and forwards.

There was a silence. Laraque broke it with a joke. "An aeroplane!" he announced. And it was a hawk! Other frivolous remarks followed. Suddenly chilled, I asked myself whether my words had missed fire.

I had no more fear about it a moment afterwards, as we went back to billets—slight, striking indications—they all had more life in their movements, something firmer in their tones.

Fortin had murmured: "I think Dreher's right."

We were just about to disperse near our school, when some cavalry turned out of a side street. We saluted the officer at their head, a colonel. He urged his mount towards us:

"Hi, there, you foot-sloggers, read that!"

He held out a paper, which Fortin handed to me without a word.

Why me? I hesitated about unfolding it. The others shouted: "Yes, yes, give it to Dreher, that's it!"

I felt as if I were in a dream. At the first glance I understood. A proclamation signed "Joffre."

I said: "Call the others!"

The signal had already been given. A torrent of men flowed in from all the different companies. There was a bench just by. I got up on to it. From there I dominated the crowd which was gathering round me in increasing numbers. Soon half the regiment was there, and some passers-by joined on. There were shouts of: "Listen! Listen!" Then a dead silence.

I began to read, subconsciously approving the way in which I raised my voice and scanned each syllable. It was the famous order of the day, which has so often been reproduced since then

"At the moment in which a battle is beginning upon which the fate of the nation hangs . . . Troops which can no longer advance must be killed where they stand rather than give ground."

Not a syllable escaped me. Not a soul asked for it to be read again. A ripple ran over this dumb throng. I jumped to the ground, and got lost in the crush. What intuition urged me to make a dash for our billets? Hardly had I crossed the threshold—how quickly things happened!—before a whistle was blown.

Humel, who was corporal of the day, ran by like a flash. "Come along! On with your pack!"

"Are we off again?"

"That's it!"

Guillaumin appeared.

"Off we go!"

De Valpic was the next to turn up: "You read that splendidly!"

I soon noticed a sort of irresolution among the men, due to surprise more than anything else. Start again! When they thought they were going to have several days' rest! And they had felt so sure that there would be no more fighting in the open for them!

Some of them had instinctively gathered round me: Judsi, Bouillon, Corporal Bouguet, Icard, and Gaudériaux. They were puzzled, too, but only asked to have things explained. They asked me about the paper that I had read out. Several of them had not been there.

"We'll have it again for you!"

This time I choked with emotion at the last lines. I added:

"Look here! The Bosches think we're not worth

taking into account. They think we're safely shut up in the camp. We're going to fall upon them in the rear!"

Their faces suddenly cleared.

"Good biz!" said Judsi. "Wot a lark! Lor', the blighters! Wot a biff we'll give 'em!"

It was like a fuse followed by an explosion of gaiety. Some of the men were already buckling on their packs, and others pulling on their boots and doing them up. Bouguet began to sing at the top of his voice:

We don't care a blow!
Tra-la-la-la.
We don't care a blow!

Lamalou spoilt his effect.

"Wot do you mean, 'don't care a blow'?"

They went on getting ready to a chorus of jests. They might have been starting off for a holiday.

Directly I was fully equipped, I went out and was one of the first to get into the avenue. I could not master the transport which swept me off my feet, at the thought of going into action. Of taking the offensive again! The captain must have second sight—and the time was not past. Our chance was intact, indeed, increased. Heavens! All that I had hoped for was coming to pass. Let me confess my vanity, my childish simplicity. I was actually under the delusion that if our luck was turning, it was my reward, for having drawn myself out of the pit to help others.

And was I so very much mistaken? Was I not responsible for a small share in this immortal decision?

Would our leaders have taken such a risk—it was a bold move!—if those waves of faith and enthusiasm, which a few of us had raised, had not spread from our watchful quarters right away to them?

BOOK IX

September 7th-9th

CHAPTER XVI

FINAL ANTICIPATION

WE started that evening from Rosny-sous-Bois, and spent part of the night in the train, slipping along at an indolent pace. We had not the least idea where we were being taken to. During the last hour, the rumble of the guns began to make itself heard. We were rolling slowly towards it.

The day was breaking when we got out of the truck. A lot of men had dozed, and had puffy faces, and dirty tongues.

There was a persistent rumour that if we stopped in the open country, it meant that the line was cut. There was a station not far off; Ducostal bicycled to it and told us when he came back that it was Nanteuille-Haudoin.

The colonel held a consultation with his officers.

Henriot was rather pale when he reappeared. He took me aside and told me in confidence that they had just been introduced to a regulation concerning them. All commanders of units whose men showed signs of faltering "would be held personally responsible."

He sounded me.

"Do you think that means that we should—be shot?"

"Exactly! You're lucky to have a platoon like ours!"

"That's true," he said, regaining his self-possession.

I added: "While the first—for instance!"

"Well, well?"

I stopped, and did not give him my reasons.

Playoust had left us, when we started from Neuilly. Surprised by the sudden order transferring him to the ammunition train, he swaggered as he went off. What an escape! He was sure to get through all right now! We had not had the courage to refuse to shake hands with him. Only Guillaumin had warned him:

"Don't you keep us short of ammunition, or you'll hear about it!"

The troop train which had brought us shunted and made way for the next one which disgorged the fifth battalion. The same thing was going on in front of us and behind us. We must be detraining in force, the whole division apparently.

It was about six o'clock when we started off again towards the village lying about a mile and a half away. The guns boomed incessantly behind the rising ground near by. It was only a few hours since Nanteuil had been evacuated by the enemy. I expected the same vision of destruction and smoking ruins which had appalled us so many times near the Meuse. No. The houses were standing and intact; but they had certainly taken their share of plunder. I can recall a grocery shop which had been ransacked. The contents of sacks, drawers, boxes, and bottles, too, formed a swamp on the tiles, into which the shop-woman,

when she left her counter—I am not exaggerating—sank up to her waist.

A foul smell hung about. We had not been spoilt, as may be imagined, in the way of odours, since the beginning of the campaign. Nothing had come anywhere near this, however. The Bosches had left their nauseous traces when they went. It was the same thing everywhere—a manifestation of their *Kultur!*

The rare inhabitants who had stayed, not more than a hundred all told, who greeted us on the pavements, had only one expression for them, which they repeated between their cheers:

“Ah, the swine!”

We halted for a short time at the entrance to a square. Kind women brought us wine (goodness knows how they had managed to keep it), and other people took us to their homes with them.

I let myself be persuaded, but soon came back, sickened. The state of filth in which the Huns had left these houses was totally indescribable in polite language. It made me feel extremely ill—the hogs!—but our *poilus* were more inclined to laugh.

For all that no great crimes seemed to have been committed. One matron holding a little boy of five by the hand was shrieking that one of the brigands had held the barrel of his revolver to his temple. But judging by the round and rosy appearance of the kid, a stupid-looking child, not much harm had been done.

We started off again. Another old dame hobbled after us with a tale of some terrible tragedy. They'd had the cheek to commandeer her donkey, and to make it work all day; the poor animal was simply worn

out! They harnessed it to a furniture van! And then in the evening—to end up with—they had shot, skinned, and roasted it!

Judsi thought it all a farce, and laughed in the old woman's face:

“A relation of yours, was it?”

She fell behind, in a fury, calling us good-for-nothings.

We followed a paved street, then a cross-road, till we came to a wood. We went into it and piled arms.

I sat down with my back against a tree, while Guillaumin and the subaltern went off into the thicket. De Valpic came and joined me:

“I believe things will go all right this time,” he said.

I repeated my conversation with the captain. Jove, the man's powers of divination could not be exaggerated, but he might be mistaken in——

“The miracle of this war is at hand,” De Valpic continued. “I'm convinced of it.” His eyes shone. He murmured: “You'll see it—you'll see it all right.”

“And why not you?”

He shook his head. “No. I—I shall stay there.”

“Nonsense!” I upbraided him. What was this childishness? He was no more exposed than I was, or any of us for that matter! Why give up hope like this?

He stopped me. “Just think a minute. Isn't it the best thing that could happen to me?”

“Got as far as that?”

“How do you mean ‘as far as that’?”

He had a fit of coughing which brought colour into his cheeks and tears into his eyes. “When one has—faith!” he said, “it is less horrible—in fact it is not

horrible. What about you, Dreher? Have you never been a believer?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "My mother was very religious. I was brought up in those ideas. I remember that at my confirmation my one wish, just think of it, was to become a priest or missionary. I kept on going to mass and that sort of thing for some years; but since then—no, that's all over. But I can quite understand people believing."

De Valpic shook his head. "How can unbelievers bear the idea of death?"

"There's nothing to be done but fly from it."

"Impossible!" He lowered his voice. "For me, for instance——!"

I did not know what to say.

He continued: "Of course if one thought of death as annihilation in the dark, if one thought that nothing, nothing would survive of this substance, that one was—Ah! How dream of that without terror! I can understand shutting one's eyes to it then. And, on the other hand, it seems to me that to live without thinking of death, and without thinking of it often, is to blind oneself, to renounce all broad and free judgment. How well religion provides for all that! What courage it gives to the dying, as well as to the living! And is not all wisdom resumed in this: to give courage to man?—I was talking to you of my fiancée yesterday; she believes. Otherwise would she have continued to be engaged to me when she knew I was ill, and would she have let me go, expecting that I should not come back?" He smiled. "I don't want to preach to you, Dreher, but as you once were one of us, let me remind you that the God in whom we hope is just. Because our people's hope, throughout the

ages, has been in Him; because our nation has been the elder daughter of His Church, I believe that His hand is upon us. Will He allow us to succumb? No. Listen! This miracle I was talking about—at heart you expect it just as I do—if I have entire confidence in it, it is because I believe in the existence of an order superior to man; in a Providence, if you will, that will not allow the accomplishment of such iniquity. Our country will be saved because she will deserve to go on living. How good it is to fight, when one does not feel that one is fighting amidst the cold concatenation of phenomena, but in the conviction that a supreme tutelary force upholds and directs our efforts.”

I considered him as he sat there with his chin in his hands and black lines under his eyes. So he had been through the deep waters at the beginning, when he had had to tear himself away from the hope of human happiness. Now he was resigned to it. He was not lying when he said that he looked forward to his certain end, which was so near at hand, without horror. His glorious smile retained confidence in the future beyond the grave. It was only a relative end, a transition whose anguish was attenuated since he was sure of living again with those whom he loved.

Oh, the consolation in religion! This association of well-worn words recovered its full meaning in my eyes. Nothing but faith could raise man to such abnegation. The profound and primitive instinct, an instinct comparable to love in its folly and grandeur!

I was tempted, for a moment, to admit that that also was being reborn in me. And then, no—no! I assured myself that I had been separated from it beyond return, by my reading and speculations. This past would never blossom again. At least I

recalled the memory of it with tenderness. For a long time I had thought myself rallied to the quizzical scepticism of Laquarrière and his like. How many ties still bound me to the unsophisticated child that I had been. I would have the sons that Jeannine gave me brought up in the lap of Catholicism, too. Neither their mother nor I would take any steps to convert them to pitiless reason too soon. Like us they might, later on, be led away by the trend of modern thought and forsake religion, but their stay in its realm would leave them like me with respect for the Illusion reflected in certain eyes.

Guillaumin came to tell us that it would not be long before we started, the regiment next us was on the move. "What a glorious day!" he exclaimed.

The eight o'clock sun was slipping through the tracery of the branches on to the leaves grown rusty at the approach of autumn. The air was mild and warm. Swarms of midges were flying about. We caught the hum of mosquitoes' wings, but they did not sting. The men were rolling about on the moss; our Parisians conjured up the delights of the Bois de Verrières.

We all three went to the edge of the little wood. De Valpic stretched out his arms and drank in the health-giving air, soaked with light.

"Ah! How good it is!" he said. "How one lives here! How one realises—too late—that one was ill-suited for living in towns, that one would have done better in beautiful country like this!"

Guillaumin laughed. "A little flat, this country. It's certainly not up to Argonne!"

"My dear chap, don't talk like a snob. Just put your prejudices aside for a moment, and take a look."

De Valpic playfully made us admire the trees, the play of the sunlight and the breeze, the immense vista on the right, over a sea of waving corn, and down below those wooded islets, outposts of the deep forests which, we knew, dominated the surrounding country. The sweetly named Île de France, the land of plenty and of poetry—the most pleasant climate in the world. Senlis and Compiègne, a few miles away—Jean Jacques' Ermenonville gracious legends spring from this soil. Not far off Gérard de Nerval had sung of Sylvia.

His playfulness was not assumed. We listened to him captivated. I tasted in his conversation a sort of funereal charm. I felt as if I were listening to Socrates conversing with his disciples as he drank the hemlock.

The air was filled with whirring sounds. We had a vivid and fleeting vision of two aeroplanes, a French one and a Taube, passing over our heads, struggling for height and speed, engaged in a duel to the death, both of them armed with machine-guns which cracked under the open sky.

They were just on the point of vanishing when suddenly the German one dipped. The pilot was no doubt hit. The wings folded and it dropped like a stone.

“A good omen!” Guillaumin exclaimed.

Twenty minutes afterwards we started.

CHAPTER XVII

WE TAKE UP OUR POSITION

A MAGNIFICENTLY monotonous memory, our march that day. It lasted from nine o'clock in the morning until six o'clock at night. Its scene was a vast tableland, completely exposed, fields of beetroot alternating with fields of corn and oats. The harvest had been got in nearly everywhere. There were groups of stacks by the roadside.

Directly we came out of the woods, we were marked by the hostile artillery. Their object was to stop us at any price by their *tirs de barrage*. The rumbling went on all day without a pause. It is impossible to give any idea of the horror of it. By midday, everyone of us was deaf.

The diabolical jaws of the horizon! Big and little German guns were talking. Our 75's retorted—rather feebly, it is true. The distance must have been too great, and apparently did not silence a single one of the enemy's batteries.

This plain was a hell, a hell: iron and fire, every imaginable peril, a conspiracy of the elements. To begin with, there was a continuous flight of Teuton aeroplanes above our heads, dropping bombs of different kinds, which fell with a muffled sound. The din of the big "coal-boxes," the shriek of the 77's, the

thunder-clap of explosions, and the columns of tainted smoke staking out the ground.

Our regiment went on advancing; so did one on our right and one on our left, and others farther away. Our soldiers were swarming as far as eye could see, a calm and regular deployment. We marched for a long time by platoons, in columns of four; then by platoons two deep; and at last in skirmishing order; each officer, each N. C. O., each connecting file in his place. The silence and impeccable order were in striking contrast with the blind fury of the projectiles. Mind against matter.

All our men had realised the solemnity of the task. Three quarters of them were experienced heroes, who had already fought ten times; the rest were raised to the same moral level by virtue of their surroundings. There could be nothing more impressive than this sustained and irresistible advance, under shell fire, of thousands and thousands of men who never fired a single shot.

By a miracle, our casualties, on the whole, were not very severe. What unflagging inspiration was shown by our leaders of all ranks! Imperceptible, serpentine movements protected each unit in turn from the mortal line of fire. How many times did we see a broadside of four "coal-boxes" fall just where we had been hardly thirty seconds before, or else where we would have been but for a fortunate zigzag! What hazard protected us? I protest that one was tempted to bow before a Providence, like De Valpic. The men betrayed this feeling, murmuring:

"We are blessed!"

We advanced at the double, lay down and got up again, just as at manoeuvres. What am I saying?

Better than that. We kept our intervals and direction with incredible exactitude. There was not a straggler or funk among us. All honour to these proud troops, these splendid soldiers! They are dead—dead, nearly all of them. They appeared to feel, in the vague intuition of their flesh, in the vibration of the nourishing air, that their end, even if they survived to-morrow's sanguinary triumph, was inscribed on the pages of the disastrous winter or the fatal spring to come. There was no sadness or despair, but something indescribably resigned and shy crept into their gait. Joking was out of date. Judsi himself had put a damper on his animation. We kept on and gained ground. At one point—the wonders could not be repeated indefinitely—a single *rafale* on our left mowed down about forty men. We did not slacken our pace—hardly turned our heads.

We went on in a rising tide, and I thought how the sight of this inexorable multitude rolling towards them, like God's judgment, must strike terror into the hearts of the enemy's gunners.

At the end of the day we neared a wood. I was very much afraid lest the hostile infantry might be hidden there, watching for us. Those barricades of trees looked most suspicious. Our reconnoitring patrol went on ahead of us. I trembled for their safety. The rest of us lay down and waited in an agony of fear. Not a shot was fired. What a relief it was when the wood turned out to be unoccupied—by living men, at all events.

When we, in our turn, penetrated into it, we found it strewn with dead bodies. What a struggle must have raged there during the last few days! There

was not much undergrowth, which made it propitious for hand-to-hand fighting. The scene was re-enacted in my mind. The Bosches about to continue their defensive organisation, surprised by the attack of the rifle brigade—our dead bore this uniform. The furious onslaught with the sword. We had driven them back at the point of the bayonet and massacred them wholesale. In advancing, we came upon heaps of Germans. We had lost a great many men, too, but they had cleared the way for us. We were duly grateful to them and the men stepped carefully and reverently over their remains as they advanced in single file.

“Pore old chaps!” sighed Icard. “You’re havin’ a rest now and it’s our turn to do the swottin’.”

Evening was falling. We had not gone more than three hundred yards after leaving the wood, when we halted. We were warned to make the best of the position. A certain sector was allotted to us, and we were told that we must hold it all the next day. Hold it only? Guillaumin looked at me and pulled a face. What we wanted to do was to get on. The Big Push was what we were out for. He urged me to question the captain on the situation, as I was on such good terms with him. I refused. A little occurrence which had taken place that morning was still rankling in my mind. I had thought I might be permitted to ask our company commander whether the enemy was far off. Ribet had heard me all right, but had not deigned to answer. He had looked through me as if I did not exist, and then called his orderly. That meant—what? Simply that the captain intended to be familiar only when it suited him. I had been annoyed

and offended. I should let him make the advances, next time!

The lieutenant seemed embarrassed by the task entrusted to him. As we were occupying the edge of a wood the temptation was great to make use of the resources at hand—the trees for instance. Henriot bustled about and had the saws got out; then asked me whether there was not some way of getting hold of some petard of melinite to put round the big trunks. He spoke too loudly. The *poilus* snorted when they heard him. Nobody felt inclined to undertake such a piece of work which would have lasted all night. And then, we were so certain to leave it all behind when we charged to-morrow.

Some time was lost in bandying words. We had been there for half an hour when the captain came up.

“Not begun yet?”

Henriot began to unfold his plan. Ribet cut him short, after the first words.

“You’re quite off the mark! The edge of a wood! Do you imagine we’re going to settle down at the edge of a wood—a line which is sure to be especially marked? You wouldn’t have a man left. Take two or three hundred yards in front there. Exactly! And now dig me some good trenches!”

“Deep ones, sir?”

“That’s your lookout. You must arrange that. Let your men do the best they can—and remember that you may be attacked any minute.”

He went on. His tall silhouette disappeared behind the bushes.

Covered by a new patrol party, we chose a piece of ground of the length indicated. Night had come. The stars shone out one by one. The cannonade was

diminishing in intensity. The long beams of the searchlight were probing the dark sky in all directions.

And now to our task. Guillaumin and I wielded spades ourselves, but the work did not get on fast, in spite of our efforts to hasten it. The men were lazy. They had made so many of these trenches in the Meuse and in Argonne which were never used at all.

At the end of an hour we had a ditch only a yard wide at the most, and not deep, allowing just enough room to fire kneeling down. We had to be content with it.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FIRST IMPACT

WHAT made me a little anxious was the need for sleep manifest in nearly everyone. Sentries were to relieve each other in definite order—but what guarantee was there? In another hour all these men, who were yawning now, would be snoring!

I myself was dying to go to sleep. In view of the gravity of the situation I encouraged myself in the idea of going the rounds every hour. But the lieutenant came to find us and told us of his intention of mounting guard himself. He asked us, in a friendly way, to do the same on our side. We three between us would ensure the safety of the sector.

We must needs bow to necessity. I was tempted to admire Henriot; he showed the vigilance of a real leader. Then I smiled. It was no doubt the effect of the minute received that morning concerning responsibilities.

What an interminable vigil that was. The men slept like logs, including, to begin with at all events, several of the sentries. I can answer for it that I shook them in a way that made them sit up.

When I got back to the picket I had chosen, I had all I could do to keep awake myself. A helmet of lead seemed to encircle my temples. I had a headache and felt overpoweringly drowsy. I dozed off

about midnight, but not for long, luckily! The respite did me good.

Hour after hour passed by. It was a clear night, though the moon made only a late appearance. The landscape was lacking in any conspicuous features. There was nothing that caught one's eye right away to the horizon, which might be near or far.

It would not be long before daybreak. We were freezing where we stood. B-r-r! B-r-r-r! I shook myself and rubbed my shirt against my skin to warm myself. My attention had wandered.

Guillaumin suddenly appeared. I had not seen him coming.

He said to me:

"Not noticed anything?"

"No. Have you?"

"Yes, for the last few minutes. . . . I think there's something doing."

We strained our ears for a few thrilling seconds. Dead silence. Guillaumin admitted that he must have been mistaken, and apologised. But at this point Bouillon came crawling along in a hurry.

"Here come the Bosches. Look! Look!"

Yes. There was a moving line yonder, cutting across the pale grey of the stubble.

What orders would the lieutenant give? We went to look for him, quickly rousing the *poilus* on our way. They got up, rubbing their eyes, and noiselessly seized their rifles at the order to stand to arms.

We met Bouguet on the way, equally on the alert. The whole platoon was breathless with excitement. We passed word along the line to our neighbours.

And what of Henriot? We ended by discovering the poor wretch, who had probably held out all night

against his weariness, overcome by it at last, and snoring away with his head on his arm.

Guillaumin shook with laughter.

"A lot of good all his trouble had been!"

He wanted to startle him by clapping him on the back. I objected. What was the good of humiliating him? I arranged to catch him with my elbow as I brushed past, and deferentially inquired as he moved:

"Is that what you would advise, sir?"

"What! What!" he said, opening his eyes.

"To send word to the captain."

He raised himself up to listen to us, and approved our suggestions.

It was like a moving film! . . . That dark silent line, that line of assailants at which we turned to look continually, which we imagined was still a long way off. The speed was suddenly quickened. There was a sound of galloping—which seemed quite near. I strained my eyes, my lips opened with a jerk. I took a step forward. . . .

Henriot blew his whistle.

I can still hear the rip of that imperious salvo. A volley of shrieks answered it from the plain, and dispelled my shudders.

And the salvo grew more violent and rolled along the whole line of trenches. We saw nothing further: simply went on firing, sweeping the ground in front of us. I shouldered my rifle and discharged it distractedly, just as mad as the others. The crash and uproar rose and swelled and threatened.

It did not last more than a minute. The attack was badly carried out, or, at all events, sustained. It was an entire failure. Our firing persisted. Cries could still be heard, but of pain now, and also the

interjections of officers rallying their men. There were smothered moans and death-rattles. Our firing still continued. When it ceased nothing was moving on the plain and only an occasional guttural groan could be heard. When the dawn came we saw the stubble-fields strewn with bodies, some of them less than thirty yards away. They had fallen face foremost. The rest had been hit in flight. It was impossible to go and pick up even the dying. They must stay there all day, ghastly witnesses of the encounter.

It was broad daylight now.

Where had the enemy taken refuge? Probably behind one of those distant copses, unless they occupied trenches somewhere in this undulating plain which sloped gently away.

The German artillery was obviously anxious that we should not forget its presence. The avalanche of shells started again with terrific fury. Nothing but big "coal-boxes." Luckily all or nearly all of them roared over our heads to explode in the woods. Suppose we had stayed there!

The captain appeared towards seven o'clock and told us that we should be there for some time.

One pleasant surprise was the coffee, which was brought up from the rear by Fachard and Pomot, two cheery fellows who were seen coming along in the distance, smiling and fearless, gaily swinging their dixey. They had had to cross the zone of fire to get to us. When questioned, they admitted that they had had no orders. It was simply an idea of theirs to warm the lads up a bit. And they meant to go back. Fachard was no less a personage than the

colonel's cook. His duty called him. Oh no, that couldn't be allowed. Lamalou forbade them to move. The colonel and his stew would have to look after themselves. They weren't going to let lads like that get themselves pinked, not much.

The captain, who turned up again, began by giving the two cronies a good slanging. A piece of nonsense that might have drawn the fire on to us. Then he calmed down and asked if he might taste their famous coffee, and congratulated them on it.

Pomot took a fancy to our platoon and stayed with us. I talked to him, but did not get much out of him at first. The thing that had struck him most was a shell which had just killed two staff-officers. Oh, yes, and then he had heard that reinforcements had arrived. An important piece of news that. I pressed him—then he told me a fantastic tale which had got about of taxis having brought up Zouaves and Turcos and Foreign Legion men, all night, nothing but those frightful creatures from Africa! It seemed to me an unlikely tale, but I thought it worth spreading all the same. It gave the men a tremendous fillip.

“Them chaps knows the business end of a bayonet all right w'en they sees it!”

Some time passed. I was occupied in getting our trench made deeper. The men put their backs into it better than they had the day before. But the captain immediately gave orders to stop the work, not to attract the attention of the enemy's lookout men. Everyone appeared delighted. They only bemoaned the fact that they were forbidden to smoke.

The German shells fell unceasingly, with clumsy, obstinate precision, a few hundred yards behind us. Part of the wood was on fire and black smoke hung

above it. Sometimes when a shell fell near the edge of the wood leaves and branches could be seen spurting up, as at the kick of some huge monster.

It certainly was a rest for us. The crash of bursting shells no longer startled us. We had even given up ducking when the projectiles swished over our heads. The men were sitting or lying about in drowsy attitudes. Many of them were taking another nap. Aided by a natural feeling of indolence they ended by taking it for granted that this sort of fighting would last.

Another hour went by. I vaguely wished I could take some interest in the struggle. If only I had had a periscope or some field-glasses. I was too slack to go and borrow Henriot's. For a moment I experienced a kind of humiliation—was this all that would be required of us? Should we share in the glory of this victory without having earned it?—No one, up till then, doubted that it would be a victory—and leave the honour of the decisive attacks to those African devils? And then I must admit that this thought suddenly pleased me. I should get off easily and my friends too. Everything seemed to be turning out for the best. And De Valpic? Oh, he would recover.

Then, lulled by the deafening tumult of the cannonade, with my eyes half closed, I indulged in visions of a tender face. I wandered, enchanted, in the golden mists of the future. . . .

CHAPTER XIX

HOLDING OUT

I WAS aroused from these day-dreams by a hulla-baloo. The men were on their feet shouting: "Here they come! Here they come!"

I tried to impose silence on them: so much waste breath. And I was infuriated by hearing shots being fired without any orders having been given.

I leaned on the parapet, but could see nothing. I shouted: "What in thunder are you shooting at?"

At that moment the well-known screeches lashed the air. I flung myself down. German bullets!

Bouillon said, below his breath: "The blighters! Their trenches weren't far off."

When their volley was over we looked for them. They must have lain down. I consulted Lamalou: "A thousand yards, do you think?"

"Eight hundred, not more."

I gave the men orders to correct their sight. They had all been firing at four hundred in their surprise.

A rumour spread that they were coming.

"Fire! Fire!"

This time we could see them. Quite a change! Nearly everywhere, at Tailly, Halles, and Beauclair we had had to fire at random. How often I had cursed their invisible uniforms! Here, again, this grey line melted into the ground tint.

Never mind. Our men fired rapidly and coolly. The others threw themselves down again and their projectiles forced us to crouch down in our turn.

"There are an awful lot of them, the dirty dogs!" Henriot said to me.

"As many as all that?"

"Yes. I've been using my field-glasses. And they advance shoulder to shoulder, looking as if they meant to swamp everything."

"Oh, well, we're here!" I said. But I glanced at our sparsely covered line. Had we reserves anywhere! It was to be hoped so, but until further orders, we had only ourselves to count on.

The enemy was gaining ground. However, discipline had soon been established among us. Each time the hostile mass moved, we "loosed off a belt." Everyone was cool and collected, no more panic like there had been at Mangiennes. Each *poilu* was determined to get the most out of the good Lebel in his hands.

I went up and down, warning them not to waste ammunition. I watched Corporal Donnadieu for a few minutes. How would he manage with his mutilated hand? Well, he used nothing but his left hand to rest his rifle on. It grazed one of the stumps and forced him to stifle an exclamation of pain. He did not lose a single second in firing and recharging in spite of his puckered forehead and clenched teeth.

"Good for you, old chap," I said.

He did not answer, but his eyelashes fluttered.

Our trench lacked depth, the firing-steps were missing—a grave cause of fatigue. I reproached myself bitterly for our slackness the day before. If only

we had taken the trouble to dig a little bit deeper, to fetch wood, and arrange loopholes.

The Bosches manœuvred skilfully. Some of them crouched down and facilitated their comrades' advance by firing. Then they took their turn at advancing while the others protected them.

There was nothing for us to do but to fire. Fire without ceasing for an instant, even under a hail of bullets. The men had realised this sanguinary obligation. There was no need for leadership. It was splendid to see them, taking aim without hurrying themselves over it, under the deadly torrent. The casualties began immediately. Trichet was the first to fall with a hole through his neck. A machine-gun of theirs had just begun to talk, and things were looking black in other ways. The shells which, for a long time, had been negligible, now began to find the range in the most alarming manner. The ground shook. Three men in No. 2 platoon had their heads taken off at a blow.

The enemy was drawing nearer, and was not more than about four hundred yards away now. I confess I was extremely miserable. Another quarter of an hour and they would be within charging distance. We should have to meet this human avalanche and we should not be one to their five.

I almost formed the cowardly wish that we might retire without waiting any longer. How agonising it was. We should certainly never be strong enough to withstand them. A wave of irritation rose in me against our artillery which was incapable of intervening at the right moment, having been completely annihilated by the heavy German batteries, and also against the superior military authorities who gave us

no support. And I was paralysed by a sudden fear. We were using a lot of cartridges. Suppose our supplies were to give out! Playoust would be sure to be stopping ever so far behind with his waggons. What a ridiculous idea it had been to entrust him with that work.

The sight that gave me new strength just as I was feeling inclined to give way, and on the point of being false to all that I was and wished to be, was the attitude of the men. I can see them now taking aim and recharging, with their manly, straightforward, earnest faces. There was no confusion. They made admirable practise, their rifles leaping to their shoulders, or falling again in good earnest. What moral strength they showed! What a genius for resistance! How much their nerve had improved, and their courage increased during the last four weeks! It seemed to me that their virtue was, in part, my work, that my attempts at patient, serene exhortation were bearing their fruit. How grateful I was to them, my brothers. They were returning my lesson—not to argue, but to fight. To fulfil one's obscure duty. They were right. After all if we were to be killed at this spot in accordance with a higher scheme; if success were only to be won at this price!

The enemy were no longer making any progress. They had got to the point after which any further advance under fire is merely an act of heroic folly. Our losses were not very great—only two killed in the platoon and four or five wounded, among them Bouguet, who, with a shattered arm, had distributed his rounds of ammunition, and was standing up boldly and reporting on the slightest movements of our adversaries.

The Bosches had been badly cut up. We felt as if we were at a short practise range. After having fired at the mass as a whole for a long time we were now choosing our target. I remember a great lout who was running with large strides ahead of his companions. He got exactly into my line of fire. It was his destiny. I took aim, but he threw himself down in the stubble. I was patient enough to keep my rifle pointed at the spot where he had disappeared—it was a risky thing to do as the bullets were whistling round me. I waited anxiously for him to get up. He delayed and delayed. At last he moved. Then I pressed the trigger. Tac! My shot carried and he fell.

I shut my eyes, feeling strangely giddy. Yes. After five weeks' fighting, he was the first victim definitely attributable to me. Heavens! My inborn gentleness and that of my education were to end in this—in taking life! I had killed a man. A man with a mother and a wife. That handsome fellow. I thought of my friends in Thuringia, of Otto Kraemer, sturdy and gentle.

“Wake up! What in the world are you thinking of?” said Bouillon, who was standing beside me.

I shook myself and took my sight again. It was all part of the war. He was one of those who had massacred my brother. It was a case of killing or being killed—him or me!

For a long time we prevented them from moving. We saw the horde get up in a flock and dash forward twenty times or more. At the same instant we met them with our fire, coldly precise. Their leaders, who were urging them on, were recognisable, not so much by their uniform as by their movements. Many of them were hit and the ardour of the troops diminished.

They were well-drilled infantry, but they lacked keenness.

We lost all interest in everything but this narrow strip of ground swept by our fire. I put down my rifle which had burnt my fingers. The mechanism had got jammed in several places and I mended it as if in a dream.

We did not fire incessantly. There were moments of inaction when I tried to analyse my feelings in accordance with my old intellectualism. I came to grief over it. My ideas got blocked, and I gripped the trail of my Lebel, my one object in existence. One thought alone subsisted in the void of my brain, and I clung to it. Those men must not be allowed to take another step in our direction.

All notion of time was lost again. I remember that I looked for the sun in the sky. It was shining a long way from the point at which I had expected to find it. My wrist watch had stopped, the glass was broken.

From time to time Guillaumin came to look me up and make some remark such as "Hot work, what!"

This time he leant towards me and said something which I could not quite catch. I got him to repeat it. "What?"

Ah. Now I understood. How many rounds had my men got left?

"Mine have about fifteen," he said.

"About the same here, too."

We looked at each other. I murmured: "And what about the replenishment."

"Ssh!"

He put his finger to his lips. As if the men had not

noticed the imminent penury! Several of them had applied to Lamalou for some of his share.

Luckily the enemy's fire was weakening equally. Both sides were drawing breath. The Germans' heavy artillery never paused for an instant. The explosions of enormous "Jack Johnsons" barked all round us. One of them, which fell less than twenty yards away, dug a hole of ten feet and filled part of our trench with the earth it displaced.

Guillaumin and I threw despairing glances towards the rear. The look of the wood had changed completely since morning. A wood? There was not a tree standing!

Guillaumin grumbled: "If I could get hold of Playoust!"

I quite agreed.

CHAPTER XX

WE ARE NOT DEFEATED

How stiff I was. I stretched. Every joint was aching. I started off, meaning to go all along the bit of line held by the platoon.

The trench was so narrow that the men had to glue themselves against the parapet in order to let me pass. I forced myself to give a friendly word of encouragement to each man. I suddenly bumped into a body. Gaudéreaux! The poor fellow's skull had been crushed like a nut.

There were wounded men here and there. Bouguet, who had had to give in and sit down, his face drawn with pain; and Icard, with folded arms, as plucky as ever, though his shoulder had been ripped up by a splinter of shrapnel.

For whom was I looking? I did not realise it until De Valpic hove in sight. There he was, safe and sound. What a relief! His cap was pushed back on his forehead, his cheek-bones were purple, and he had a scratch on his temple which was bleeding.

He had caught sight of me, and was coming up when I saw Chailleux, our connecting file, appear behind him. He shouted:

"Where's the lieutenant?"

"Any orders?"

"Yes, we're to fall back."

"What?"

"In artillery formation."

I was disgusted.

"How absolutely idiotic."

De Valpic exclaimed in a hoarse voice:

"We're outflanked on the right."

The edge of the wood sloped away on that side.

A sudden squall hurled us all to the ground. We were blinded by soil. De Valpic was half buried. Two yards from us a man, who was leaning against the parapet, reeled, but remained standing on his feet. Horrors! His head was severed as if by the blow of an axe, just above the contorted mouth. De Valpic who had freed himself, and was none the worse, except for feeling somewhat dazed, could not bear the sight of it. He tottered, and his eyes were dimmed. I went to his help, but he recovered himself immediately.

"Carry on, carry on," he murmured. "You're needed over there."

I went back and found Henriot feverishly repeating:

"Now, don't let's lose our heads."

"It's a good job we're going to hook it," Guillaumin said to me. "We're about done."

It was quite true. There were nothing but bewildered, dazed-looking men all round, with strained and haggard faces and trembling hands. They would not have counted for much against a resolute onslaught. The enemy, cautious and practical, seemed as busy as possible digging new trenches two hundred yards away from us.

I looked blankly at Guillaumin:

"What do you think? Are we done for?"

He began to chaff me.

"Could we ever be done for?"

The quartermaster-sergeant came round, with two of the men. All three were smilingly handing round their caps, collecting:

"Please help the poor."

What did they want? Ammunition? Yes, a few extra rounds for the platoon which was to stay and cover the retreat.

I started. So some men were to be sacrificed. I put on a detached tone:

"Which platoon has been warned for the job?"

"They drew lots," he said. "It's to be Delafosse's."

No. 1. I hurried along to them, feeling that I could not go without shaking Humel by the hand. He was touched by it.

"It means hell for us," he said. "But mind you fellows get off all right."

The men accepted their lot without keenness or bitterness. Descroix was standing a few yards away. I took a step towards him.

"Good luck, Descroix."

"Like to change places?" he snapped, in a fury.

I felt certain that he was going to be killed, and I was sorry that his last hour should not see his mind ennobled.

I dreaded this withdrawal. It always means more casualties than anything else.

At a pre-arranged signal, we all leapt out of the trench together, and bolted at the double, bending down as low as possible. Bullets whistled past our ears, but No. 1 platoon retorted vigorously, and the enemy, as I have already said, seemed equally short of ammunition.

By a lucky coincidence, the fury of the artillery had diminished. We reached the wood without losses.

Arrived there, the difficulty was to slip through this inextricable tangle of leafy branches and jagged tree-trunks. Everything was splintered and hacked, and struck one as being the work of drunken wood-cutters.

We had to climb and hoist ourselves up and slither down the other side, and cut our way through. Our accoutrements caught into everything, and the rifles impeded our progress. I bruised my leg badly against a treacherous stake. We nearly lost our way, having had to make a large circuit in order to avoid a lot of big trees which were still smouldering. An acrid smoke followed us, with which there was mingled a vaguely putrid stench. Under the piles of foliage, hundreds of dead bodies were lying, which had been in a state of decomposition for four days.

My great object was to avoid getting separated from my men. I shouted to them continually, and they followed as best they could. Some of the wounded, Bouguet among them, dragged themselves along heroically.

Suddenly, as I was balancing myself on a huge fallen oak, there was a spurt of flame, and a deafening report. I was flung into the underwood. I got up at once, and, directly the smoke began to clear away, looked round for the lieutenant. I had a terrible feeling that he was pulverised.

No, I soon discovered him, stretched under some bracken. He was motionless. I bent over him and saw that his eyes were open and full of tears.

"Hit?" I said.

He stammered: "Yes. The th-thigh. I'm—done for."

I looked. There was a large tear in his trouser, and underneath I caught a glimpse of—such a mess!

I made a movement as if to look for his field dressing. Pink froth appeared on his lips:

"Not—w—worth it," he stuttered.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

I should have liked to pick him up in my arms and carry him away, poor Henriot.

He made an attempt to unbutton his tunic. I helped him. He nodded approval. I think he wanted to get hold of some photograph or letter—the tradition of the dying soldier, whose eternal nobility moved me.

His strength forsook him.

Of my own accord, I fumbled in his pocket, took his letter-case and held it out to him. He half-opened his eyes again, and raised himself. His lips moved. His eyelashes fluttered. He took a breath and fell back. I did not know whether he was dead, or had only fainted.

Another shell burst just by. Something struck my cheek. I put my hand up. There was blood on it. But it was only a fir-cone which had been flung down.

I turned towards Henriot again. Our men were scattered in the distance. It was impossible to call any one back, and equally impossible to carry him without help. He and I were alone, face to face. What was it he had wished to confide in me? This incomplete scene was becoming tragically mysterious.

"Good-bye, good-bye," I murmured, perhaps to a dead man.

I took the letter case with me, and stumbling beneath the weight of my pack, plunged into the thicket in pursuit of my companions.

I did not catch them up until I got to the other side of the wood. Guillaumin was looking out for me!

"What's become of Henriot?"

"Gone west, I think. A 'Jack Johnson.'"

"Poor fellow!"

And then:

"You'll take command of the platoon?"

I hesitated:

"Why not you?"

"You're the senior."

As a matter of fact, I had come out a few places above him at the end of our time at the "Peloton."

There was an agitated fusillade behind us, increasing in intensity—Delafosse's platoon at work.

I shouldered my rifle, and went to report the lieutenant's death to the captain. He said, curtly:

"You've got your platoon commander's certificate. You're senior to Guillaumin."

(How on earth did he know?)

He continued: "You will immediately become acting sub-lieutenant. If we both get through safely, I'll see that you get your commission."

He got back on to his horse, which his orderly brought up, and leaning across the animal's neck, said:

"In case the matter interests you, we are retiring because we chose to. Our line has not been forced. It's the enemy who can't hold out any longer. Only there's a detachment of Landwehr trying to turn us southwards."

I thanked him with a beam.

As I drew near to the platoon, Guillaumin raised his voice:

"Your new subaltern, lads!"

"Good luck to him!" Bouillon exclaimed.

There was a subdued murmur of satisfaction and approval. I must be forgiven for having noticed it. It was one of the great moments of my life.

I signed to them to be silent. Guillaumin shook my hand.

"You deserve it, Michel."

I only answered by a shake of the head. We started off again, and I was thankful that my cap threw my face into shadow. Nobody guessed that my eyes were wet. Oh, how extraordinarily buoyant, how strong I felt, both physically and morally!

The last barrier had fallen between these men's caste and mine. No more domination imposed by chance or force. I was the leader they would have chosen, just as I was the leader imposed upon them.

This was the only legitimate, the only true authority.

We were again traversing the same boundless plain, which yesterday had seen us braving the Teuton artillery, but this time in a slightly oblique line. No shells escorted us, for a change! How good it seemed.

We were marching at a smart pace, and had put not far off ten kilometres behind us. The *poilus* were reviving. Their behaviour delighted me. They marched with a will across the dry stubble. Judsi began to rag:

"If only I'd 'a thought o' bringing my grub."

Bouguet still kept up—a miracle of energy. He had got his arm in a sling. He was only sorry—no

one could guess it however long they tried—that he was not allowed to sing.

We had had nothing to eat for forty-eight hours, and had been fighting for thirty hours almost uninterruptedly.

Call us beaten men? Nonsense! About-to-be victors!

Only one thing worried me. The almost empty cartridge-pouches.

Just then we unexpectedly came across the train of company waggons. We halted, and while the replenishment was going on, our men slanged the drivers roundly. Slackers who had not been able, or had not wanted, to find us!

As for me, I looked for Playoust, determined that he should pay for some of his delinquencies. But at the sound of his name a corporal looked up:

“A sergeant of that name?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, he didn't last long!”

“What?”

“He was killed yesterday morning, just as we left Nanteuil. We hardly saw him as a matter of fact. A shell splinter.

“You don't mean it!” I said, astounded.

The corporal went on: “Probably a pal of yours, was he?”

“Yes, yes!”

“He looked a good sort, and an amusing fellow, I should say, wasn't he?” He insisted.

“One of the best?”

“A ripper!”

A posthumous reconciliation!

The halt here was prolonged. Coffee was made.

The sun set in fiery splendour. Our arms were piled up at a short distance from a cross-road. The traffic there was intense: waggons, lorries, and batteries. We drew each other's attention to four armoured motor machine-guns, which were the object of a great deal of curiosity. They were the first in use, I believe, and were going southwards.

In the growing gloom, Guillaumin pointed out De Valpic to me, deep in conversation with an officer in the Dragoons. When the latter had hurried on, our friend came back to us.

"I've just seen my cousin De Montjezieu. It's ripping the way one comes across people!"

"Any news?"

"Yes—interesting too."

We looked up anxiously.

In a few words he repeated the information he had just received. It was this: We were engaged in what might be called the second battle of the Ourcq, for there had been another fought and lost, between the 4th and 7th, by the plucky divisions of reservists from the Paris garrison. The great object of the Staff had been to collect a large army of fresh men to place in the hands of the Commander-in-Chief, the 7th Army Corps coming from Alsace, the 4th—that was ours—and then the divisions from Africa which had just disembarked at Marseilles. (So there was some truth in Pomot's tales, I thought.) With all those combined we should pull it off. We had been withstanding the pressure brought to bear on our weakest point all that day. Now we were going to take the offensive. If we managed to pierce their line . . . ! From a certain thrill in his voice I imagined that that was not all.

"What? What more do you know? Out with it!"

De Valpic hesitated for a moment: "And the decisive attack, the Big Push, is to come off to-night, according to my cousin!"

"Do you believe it?"

Guillaumin yawned. "I say, they're not counting on us, I hope!"

"Why?" I said, sharply.

"We've done our bit!"

"That's no reason!"

"I'm sleepy."

"Get down to it, old chap. We'll wake you in time for the fun."

He lay down in the ditch. The night reigned. Searchlights swept the heavens. There was an occasional star-shell, and firing all the time. A fresh breeze got up.

Some time slipped by. We were all, or nearly all, dozing. That vague fusillade in the distance would have been enough to upset us. But suddenly without a whistle, without a call, everyone was on his feet. The echo of a bugle-call was borne to us on the wind, coming from several miles away—impressive, rousing notes. The solemn sound of the Charge. Each man seized his arms ready to rush forward.

But it was not to be. The captain came by: "Our turn will come, lads. Go on resting for the present—sleep, if possible!"

He certainly had us well in hand. Those few words from him were enough. The men lay down in the grass again, wrapping their greatcoats round them, and it was not long before they were sound asleep. Stars were shining in the calm sky above us.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CULMINATION

"Up you get, sir!"

"What, what!"

Guillaumin was in front of me, smiling and swinging a lantern. Half-joking, he repeated: "I think we're in for it, sir!"

I got up. Shadows were moving round us. The sharp air stung. The night was clear but moonless. I asked what time it was. Three o'clock.

I immediately had a pleasant surprise. That form on the road—"Hume!" I dashed at him. "Hulloa, my boy! So you got through!"

"By jove! It was a bit of luck," he acknowledged.

I hungrily clamoured for details.

He explained: "You see, as long as we stayed in the trench, things went all right. We managed to hold the Bosches. They weren't particularly keen to face the bayonet. But at night we had no more ammunition. The men got unstrung and wanted to do a bunk. Delafosse opposed it—as you may imagine. Some of them began to slope off. The lieutenant made up his mind to it, and we followed them. But the Bosches got wind of it and opened fire at us. That's when we got cut up—not one out of four got away."

"The lieutenant?"

"Knocked out, disappeared."

Another name was on the tip of my tongue.

Humel understood, and lowered his voice! "Des-croix? He stayed behind, too."

I, in my turn, told him of Henriot's death, and about Playoust. I saw his forehead wrinkle. He said nothing. I took his arm.

"Well, we're here!"

"Not for long," he murmured, downheartedly.

"Yes! Yes! I swear that you, you, you understand, will get through!"

What did I know of it? But I had said it with such assurance that I felt it had given him new heart.

There was a short whistle—the captain calling up the N. C. O's.

"Well, my friends," he said, "we have been complimented on our resistance the other night, and up till four o'clock yesterday in front of the Montrolle woods. Apparently we did not do badly!" He waited for a minute. "That is not all. We are asked, or I should say commanded, to intervene again. A great honour for the regiment!"

We were all hanging on his lips.

"Mind you remember this date," he said, "in case we come back. This is the night, the 9th to the 10th, that the battle is to be won. We are attacking all along the line, and I think I may be allowed to tell you, in confidence, that some of our comrades alongside have just entered Silly-le-Long. At the other extremity the Zouaves have taken Lizy-sur-Ourcq. The enemy is apparently still in possession of a little hill near here. What we've got to do is to oust them from it." His voice trembled. He must have been trying to find a last word of encouragement. Not succeeding, he added: "We start in five minutes!"

A remark not lacking in eloquence.

I joined De Valpic in the darkness. His cough had made me aware of his presence.

Guillaumin, who ran against us, said, in a joking tone: "Well, if we aren't polished off this time!" And then, a little more gravely: "If only it's of some use."

"Do you doubt it?"

"I? What do you think? I wouldn't change places. Those who have missed this——"

He rummaged in his pocket, pulled out a sou, and threw it into the air! "Heads we win!"

"And if it's the reverse?"

"A reverse for the Bosches!"

He hunted about in the dark.

"Can't you find it?"

"It never fell. It went straight up into the sky! The best sign of all."

We did not touch upon any more serious topics. We assembled, and started off. De Valpic left us to join his platoon.

"Good-bye."

We shook hands. We were never to see him again.

The most complete human friendship had drawn us together during the last fortnight.

We marched along a road in silence for half an hour. Then we extended into the fields, like mute armed phantoms, the noise of our footsteps absorbed by the ground.

For the first time I had taken my place at the head of my platoon. My eyes searched the darkness. I regulated our pace by the captain's, whose tall silhouette stood out against the blackness. I formed only one wish which was this: that our intervention

might have a decisive quality. A wish which resembled a prayer. I implored, I don't know what God, to grant me the good fortune to be a hero.

The ground was rising in a gentle slope. We were guided towards the east by a pale transparency, herald of the day. In that direction lay the enemy; the enemy whose sentries no doubt had orders to fire upon all suspicious objects. The first bullets would be for me. I did not think of them or fear them. The fifty men behind me, who would act as I acted, were a miraculous incentive.

There was a hollow exclamation close by on our left. A sentry! A shot rang out, followed by a second. I quickened the pace, my men remaining close at my heels.

In front of us, at a distance which was difficult to estimate, we could make out a noise and what seemed like confusion. On the left an already heavy fusillade was crackling. The absurd idea crossed my mind of giving orders for a volley. But the captain contented himself with raising his sword. Advance!

Our speed increased. Charging pace, fix bayonets! Some of the men were inclined to pass me. I restrained them below my breath.

There was a sudden volley of bullets, meant for us, but distinctly too high. We advanced bent double. There was a new *rafale*. This I felt was bearing to the right, where De Valpic's platoon was. A mysterious shock warned me that at that second my friend—my friend had succumbed. . . . Mown down, this fine life. But this destiny held no terror for him. And what other awaited us!

The balls continued to mew fiercely in our ears like terrible cats. It felt like the blows of wooden ham-

mers which would pound and crush everything to dust — (“would bash our heads in”; the popular expression just fitted it).

I was thinking of that when I became aware of a sort of fluctuation behind me. Somebody shouted: “Kneel!”

It was amazing. My line had instantly given way, and thrown themselves down. There was an immediate clash of steel, followed by feverish firing. A bullet whistled past my nose. I threw myself on to the ground and turned round and cursed Henry, the clumsy lout, who was firing and firing.

What was to be done. The captain yonder was bellowing in an infuriated voice: “Advance! Advance!”

I got up, waving my rifle, and shouted: “Come along, No. 3 platoon. Show them what you’re made of!”

A few of them got up and followed me. The majority hesitated. There was no time to wait. We took about twenty steps at the double. I had to stop. There were only six *poilus* with me!

I shouted again. I yelled. The bullets were still cracking. They passed us coming from both sides. I recoiled. The confusion was terrible. I bumped into Humel. Guillaumin turned up bringing us a handful of men. I remember that I asked him coldly: “How far off are they?”

“A hundred yards.”

“Good. We’ve got ‘em!”

Then I don’t quite know what happened after that. It hardly lasted a minute. It seemed like a hundred years! I believe I rushed back in search of my men, shouting:

"This way! Come along! Follow me!"

I flew. I furrowed the ground, sowing the sacred fire in my tracks.

"Look, they can't touch us!"

They were no longer firing on our left. Hand-to-hand fighting must be going on—a cacophony. Noises which had nothing human left about them. No doubt the enemy was giving ground. I stumbled near a long ditch, a first-line trench, which they had already abandoned.

I felt sure that I was going to be killed, but oddly enough I cared very little. To-day or to-morrow, what did it matter! A thousand thoughts thronged each other in my mind. The dominant one, simple and sublime, was that Victory was leaning towards us. We should carry this hill, for I could see our men wriggling along the ground to rejoin us, and grouping themselves again.

The light and serenity, the frenzy of it! I swear that at that instant France was really something other than an abstract entity for me: the whole in which I participated, which was me and more than me. Of my own free will I was sacrificing my paltry individuality. I was melting a wan unit into the collective consciousness of the beings of my country.

Surprise may be caused by the fact that I found time to revolve all these thoughts in my mind during these brief moments, among this chaos, where I might be seen dashing about madly, expending myself in exhortations and reproaches.

Well, I did find time for them, and for a thousand others! I myself, lucid and multiplied, marvelled at it.

My resources were increased tenfold. I burst into

blossom. I attained the apogee of my power. The instant in which I raised myself to the conception of the immense national soul was also that in which my own spirit was expanded most largely. Nothing escaped me. I was twenty beings. I had a tender thought for the memory of my mother; one for my brother who had fallen; for those of my people who remained. And you, Jeannine, my betrothed, I evoked your face and let my lips caress it lightly. I descried all that life we should have lived together, and tasted all its happiness to the full. I adored you, oh my well beloved! I was certain, that at that instant you knew that I was being killed for your sake, that you were proud of it, and sobbed for it.

My men were collected there, lying with their eyes fixed on me, already half raised, ready to dart forward.

As I looked at them and counted them over, a fantastic idea struck me. Fifty living men. In a minute, half of them would be dead, at a sign from me.

Gloomily determined, I enjoyed my fatal power. Did I spare myself? No. I remained on my feet, and the bullets made a nimbus round me. Preserved by a constant miracle, I moved among these fiery trajectories like a salamander.

And then, ruminating on a vague hope of living, I dreamt that a fate protected me; that death was overawed by my temerity.

The hour struck in the depths of my consciousness.

I included all my men, body and soul, in a comprehensive gesture to advance.

Their undulating line moved as one man. Bouillon was just behind me. In getting up he seemed to

stumble, and fell like a stone, with a bullet in his forehead.

Then I began to run quickly, straight ahead. There was no longer any need to turn round. Behind me I could hear that breathing, and the heavy trot regulated by mine. We formed an inseparable block, they and I. If any fell, their places were filled up. Twenty yards away I saw phantoms scattering.

“They’re bolting!”

My own voice seemed to swell in the deep-throated roars which it tore from my companions. Living, rolling thunder! The enemy overcome and swept away! Full of a prodigious reserve of breath, life, and pride I was going to—

A-a-h!

CHAPTER XXII

SERENITY

I HAD fallen face downwards. I experienced a sensation of shattering and laceration. My eyes closed. I made a convulsive effort to get up. Impossible! But where was I wounded? My head was swimming, everything was turning round me. I was dying.

“Your leg, isn't it?”

I succeeded in opening my eyes again.

Guillaumin!

“Yes—I think so!” I stammered.

“Hurts a bit, what?”

I tried to lift up my head and spit some soil out. Everything grew dim again. I caught sight of a clown's face—Judsi, leaning over me, too.

“Carry on! Carry on!” I murmured.

They disappeared from my field of vision. I saw another line of men pass in skirmishing order, then another. Was my brain affected? Why did I think I was back in camp at Mailly and once more taking part in the parade before the Bey of Tunis?

By some strange instinct, I dreaded being helped. I preferred to die in peace. For I thought my hour had come, and abandoned myself unregretfully.

Meanwhile, some time passed. Instead of agonising, I recovered my wits.

It was my right leg that had been hit—the bone to a certainty! For the moment, the pain was not so intolerable. I felt as if my leg had been substituted by a mass of lead.

Ah! The sun! Already high in the heavens!

I now began to wish for help, but the plateau was abandoned. Quite near me there was a dead body—poor Prunelle—fallen in the posture of an oriental suppliant. Farther on Gaufreteau was drawing his last breath.

A tree stood a few yards off; a minute rise in the ground blocked out all the horizon.

I was thinking, longing to find out what really had happened. I struggled obstinately to turn over onto one side. At last I succeeded. By raising myself up on my elbow, I was able to examine my leg. It made a hideous angle under the trouser. The foot turned back towards the knee. There would have been reason enough to shudder, if that inert mass had not literally seemed a thing quite apart from me.

I thought of dressing my wound, but my strength was not up to undoing my pack and slitting up the cloth round my leg.

What was the result of the engagement? Everything tended to show that our masterly stroke at dawn had been successful. But were we following up our advantage? And how far? If only I could have dragged myself as far as that tree! I calculated the distance. What hope possessed me? I succeeded at the cost of real torture in getting into a sitting position. Now my plan was made. I must move backwards, propelling myself by my fists!

Oh! what a ghastly journey that was! I watched the removal of my leg. It was throbbing, but did not

cause me acute pain, and seemed as if paralysed; mis-shapen and swollen, like a great ball, pinning me to the ground. I was as weak as a baby. Ten times over my head sank, my clenched fingers relaxed. I allowed myself a good rest, first after each half yard then after each foot, then even this latter distance seemed to me excessive.

Having attained my end—how I do not know—I drew breath for a long time.

It now remained for me—I was ambitious—to stand up—to see something. I gripped the trunk with both arms, while my sound leg stiffened—in vain—my God! The other was pinned to the ground!

I changed my tactics, and set about raising myself on one knee. When I had got there, I exerted all the strength of my being, and began to pull myself up slowly, oh, so slowly! My grip alone supported me. My hands were grazed by the bark.

On my feet, at last—triumphant! I was able to gaze far across the plain in front of me.

It was a large expanse of wild country, cut by a railway. Little did I care for the view. What I sought for hungrily was that cloud of dust—the men. I ended by discovering it. In the distance, as far as eye could see, there was a line of skirmishers—easily recognisable—our greatcoats and red trousers!

Vloumm! Rouvloumm! Vloumm! A cannonade echoed near at hand, making the air waves vibrate. About a mile and a half away a battery of the 75's let off a trial round. Too short! They harnessed up again, swung round, and were off at a gallop.

Yonder a company of dragoons were trotting in the same direction. The pursuit had begun.

By some intuition or suggestion my vision increased at this point. I had the feeling that I could see from one end to the other of our front. On the Ourcq just by, and farther off on the Marne, the Meuse, the Moselle, this very Destiny was being pronounced; this very morning, at this very hour, the success of our counter-offensive; the hostile rabble dislocated, broken, forced to retreat.

Paris and France saved! A grand date in the history of the world! What did it matter how long the War might last.

I greeted the day of glory. This noble stretch of country, the Île-de-France, stood forth before us—our adopted land—and lay stretched at our feet, presenting a fertile appearance for our sakes.

Preserved for the sons of my race, the acres which nourished us with their substance of life-giving properties. I thought not at all of my wound, of my life, no doubt in danger. Content to have lived until this sublime instant, I united in the same love, the freed territory, the luminary shining on my country, the beings dear to my heart; and enlacing the rugged tree, I eagerly stretched myself up to follow to the very horizon our victorious colours.

My strength suddenly gave way. The leaden weight became aggravated. I yielded with the one idea of falling upon my sound limb. My forehead struck the ground and I fell into a deep swoon.

PART IV

BOOK X

Epilogue

CHAPTER I

APPREHENSIONS

“THAT’S doing very well—very well indeed!” It was Bujard, the house-surgeon, who was speaking. “If everyone got on as quickly as you——”

I no longer felt any pain. My gaze wandered round the huge room. It was warm and prettily decorated—the smoking-room in the M—— hotel, which had been converted into a hospital. My temperature was normal again and I experienced a sensation of relief and deliverance. How delightful it was to rest on this pliant mattress, in these cool sheets, to distinguish the prattle of my neighbours, and the patter of the sister’s feet standing out from the subdued hubbub in the ward.

When the light tired me, I closed my eyes on this scene, and went over the vicissitudes of the nightmare I had just left behind. . . .

My long prostration in a dying condition, on that deserted plateau; swoons from which I awoke at intervals; that deadly cycle; two days and two nights.

. . . Ah! Faces were leaning over me. They pick me up and carry me away. Where am I? A stretcher, a motor . . . Heavens, how my leg tears me! How thirsty I am!

In the train now, on some straw. Round me those poor unfortunates, spectres, drawing their last breath, can they be men? But I am like them! That first dressing in the train . . . They snip and tear my trouser and drawers; my wound is exposed, all soiled; matter and congealed blood. There is some question of detrainning me. A red-beard opposes the suggestion, I am put back on to the same straw, in a state of decay. The train starts again, and rolls on and on for days. Unexpected or unknown names of stations. The feeling of being tossed about from one end of France to the other. Oh, this heat, this jolting, this acrid, fetid odour of humanity . . . I am sleeping, or dying, unconscious . . .

A very different period follows—Vichy. A hospital ward, this; and the same bed on which I am still lying. Washed and cared for, I am born anew. I joke with the sister, a cheery soul, an ex-nurse in the expeditionary corps in China; with the house-surgeon—he and I have mutual friends.

My wound is certainly severe—the fibula is shattered, the tibia fractured. I shall limp. But what matter? They have cut away a lot and extracted splinters of bone, and scraps of clothes. . . . Barring complications, I shall have five or six weeks of it, not more.

Heavens, how beautiful life is! The Battle of the Marne has just been fought. What inspiring reading the newspapers make. The intoxication of Victory, our Victory. The very day I arrived I was able to

have two telegrams sent—their destinations will easily be guessed. Jeannine answered at once, by the ardent letter I had wished for. A promise in it makes my heart leap. The Landrys will arrange to come round by Vichy on their way to the South, where they spend each winter. There is only one slight shadow—an allusion to certain worries of the grandmother's, money matters, from what I can gather.

As to my father: here he is installed at my bedside.

My thoughts are pleasing ones, and linger over such memories. And then—and then!

A Saturday evening. Ever since the morning my leg seems to me to have got heavier. . . . Thirst dries the very marrow in my bones. My temperature suddenly rises 101.2°. When it is taken again 102.2°. What does it mean? Sunday at eight o'clock 104°. Professor Gauthier, who is called in for a consultation, examines me and seems put out. These confounded leg wounds!

More incisions, and a drainage tube is put back again, and we must wait and see.

What a day! I am consumed with thirst, and burning hot. My leg on fire right up to the hip, paroxysms of suffering, infernal shooting pains. Pus is forming in it. Exhaustion soon follows. My tongue is green, and I vomit. I no longer digest anything. Delirium sets in. I call Maman, I call Jeannine, in a despairing voice. . . .

Those silhouettes of doctors. That consultation round my bed. A haze envelops me . . . I hear music! Then Bujard's voice:

"Well, old chap . . . ?"

Halloa, he's very affectionate!

"We may have to—amputate . . . !"

From the depths of my torpor, I have understood. "Yes, take it off! Take it off!" I implore them.

"That's right! Very sensible!" He nodded. "A leg! They make such excellent substitutes! And then . . ."

He emphasised this point: "You'll suffer no more, you know!"

Oh, how well he knows my weak spot. No more suffering—or fever . . .

How did it all happen? I had no notion of anything. I came round from the chloroform to find myself in my bed. My father said to me, with tears in his eyes:

"That's all over, Michel, you're saved!"

I slept and slept. I come to life again. I open my eyes. Have I been dreaming? I should be tempted to think so. I have difficulty in persuading myself of the reality of my misfortune. My gaze never rests without astonishment on the fold in my bed-clothes, where it sinks down over the stump of my excised thigh.

Stupefaction, yes: rather than distress. I am less crushed by it than I should have expected. What an abominable thing the existence of beings mutilated in this way used formerly to seem to me. To-day the fate which awaits me does not make me revolt. I smile, without too much melancholy, at the motherly words of encouragement from the excellent nun. I take note, almost with amusement of the sensations of itching in my missing sole and big toe, common in patients who have had a leg amputated.

The secret of my serenity is to be found in the fact that my thoughts return to the decisive engagement when leading my men. I had consented to the sacri-

face. Intoxicating moments which could only be paid for with my life! And this last week again, I had seen my coffin open; death flowed in my veins. Now Destiny had had mercy on me. I might well consider myself blest!

But this period did not last long. At the end of a few days, the memory of my recent tortures paled. The withdrawal of this shadow robbed my present condition of its tinge of consolation.

There were ten of us in this ward, all seriously wounded, and operated on under favourable conditions. The general atmosphere was one of cheerfulness. I was soon out of sympathy with it.

I had made friends with my next-door neighbour, a recruit of twenty, Cadieu, by name. He was always in the most uproarious spirits and quite irresistible. I compared him with Judsi. What vitality there must be in a race which produces such men by thousands! His leg amputated too, and like mine, in the "upper third," he gaily made the best of it. First of all there was the pension. And then as an adjuster of scales it wouldn't worry him so much as all that! And then, what was a leg more or less after all?

He told me how he had been hit. When he had got the splinter in his leg, he had said to himself: "Well done! Of course you would just go and get in the light!" Lying down in a furrow he was waiting quietly for—what? Blimey! the end o' the war! The crackling was still going on as hard as ever. Suddenly, paf! Oh, my eye! A bullet in the foot. But 'e'd 'ad one bit o' luck. It was the one on the same side!

The boy had at once confided his love affairs to me. His lady friend was a housemaid to some people of good

position. Her name was Margaret. "It all began by that there song, you remember 'ow it goes, 'Margaret, give me your 'eart.' I 'ummed it to 'er—." One child brought up in the country by her parents, good old things. He expected her to come and see him at the beginning of next month: "You're kept at it pretty 'ard in 'er trade! But 'er missus' 'usband 'as just bin 'napoohed' too. She bolted off to 'im in double-quick time, an' w'en Margaret was seein' 'er orf at the station, she up and told 'er that 'er boy was knocked out, too, and blowed if the lidy didn't feel sorter touched by it, and offered 'er a fortnight's 'oliday!"

His outpourings at an end, Cadieu, seeing I was still depressed, watched me out of the corner of his eye.

"And wot abaht you? An' your sweet'eart?" he said to me one day.

I smiled. "Not married, old chap, or attached in any way. No, seriously!"

How much to the point his guess had been, though!

O Jeannine! Sleeping and waking I had thought of my love. The other week her fair image presided over my revival. It was with my heart dedicated to her that I had put myself into the hands of the surgeons, and when I had opened my eyes again, amid the giddiness and sickness, it was the light of her face that had been the first thing to pierce the veil of my torpor.

I have said that I had telegraphed, that I had received a reply. But since then, what a striking change there had been. On the threshold of a new era, I tremblingly encouraged myself not to mistrust her. I remember the tone in which De Valpic had spoken of his unchanging love, when just on the point of death.

I waited to write to her until I had recovered my strength to a certain extent. A week! How long the time must seem to her. A second letter came from her. She demanded news. . . . What a piece of news I had to announce to her!

I made up my mind to it, however.

My first sentence revealed everything to her. It was a mutilated man, I told her, who was tracing these lines to her. . . . I stopped short, and turned over to bury my head in my pillow. Tears rose to my eyes! Then I recovered myself. I so much wanted this letter to appear a normal continuation of the others. When I re-read it, I was struck by the deadly heart-break depicted in it, in spite of myself! I was on the point of tearing the pages to pieces. I stayed for a long time, balancing them in my hands. Then I finally decided to slip them into the envelope; my salvation lay entirely in the pity I should inspire.

Some days passed by in boredom, and overwhelming anxiety, the reason of which I now forbade myself to specify. I tried in vain to distract my thoughts. My father read the papers aloud to me—those around me profited by it. With the monotonous delivery of an officer giving the order of the day, he sometimes stirred us all in pronouncing the word Victory. He had to take off his glasses which were dimmed.

But the Press no longer reflected the same enthusiasm evinced for the "Battle of the Marne." The thankless battle of the Aisne was dragging on, and becoming endless. We began to feel that the enemy would hold out for a long time on this stolen territory. There was heavy fighting going on in the North. Our left and the German right struggling to outstrip each other in their race for the coast—fierce cavalry

encounters round Aire and Hazebrouck. . . . And there were already sinister rumours abroad concerning the probable fate of Anvers.

I bore myself a grudge for not being more thrilled. I urged myself to lose sight of my individual misery, in order to continue in communion with my noble nation. I tried hard to do it, but my efforts were in vain!

An epistle from Guillaumin reached me. He was safe and sound, and was anxious to be reassured on my account. His letter contained some details. Yes, poor De Valpic had fallen. His body had been identified, and was reposing in hallowed ground, beneath a cross. The platoon had been reduced to half its strength the day after Nanteuil, but reinforcements had arrived during the following days. They had been engaged over and over again since then, and were fighting nearly every day; yesterday again at Guennevières. They did not forget me in all that! Guillaumin enclosed in his letter a joint card signed by each *poilu*. One shaky scrawl was from the hand of poor Donnadiou, hit by a splinter in the abdomen, and who, so my friend told me, had succumbed during the night.

Who would believe that I put off answering him. And, for that matter, my sister-in-law, too, who had sent me several affectionate missives. Sometimes it was enervation which tortured me, as I lay there, sometimes a gloomy atony.

Margaret, Cadieu's friend, had arrived, a pretty, fair-haired girl of the soubrette and ingénue type. Her presence exhilarated my neighbour to such an extent that our corner was one long roar of laughter. I alone did not cheer up. He cast sorrowful looks at me, and the girl took to bringing me flowers in the

morning when she brought them for her Julo. How sorry they were for me!

And my father! He certainly would not have questioned me. But his speech which was usually abrupt, softened, and his gaze grew more gentle when it rested on me. I was grateful to him for his tacit compassion, and I felt inclined to cry.

CHAPTER II

RELIEF

How I trembled when at last I tore open . . . ! My doom was to be pronounced. My secret terror was dissipated on glancing at the first lines. Jeannine reminded me that she was the daughter of a soldier, the niece and granddaughter of a soldier. From time immemorial, glorious wounds had been revered in her family. She quoted the case of her great-uncle, who was also her godfather, who, in the year '70, had been hit by a bullet near his elbow, and had soon lost the use of his right arm, owing to rheumatism. Their admiration had surrounded him and followed in his train all his life long.

My misfortune, she said, had not taken her by surprise. She had dreaded it all along. Had I not discerned her deep compassion beneath the encouragement even in her very first letter?

At this point her tone grew more tender. She was aware, she said, of my bitterness and anguish which I tried in vain to conceal from her. However, I had turned to her. She thanked me for that. She was my faithful friend. She recognised herself as being picked out to help me in my trouble. After all, I was alive. Wasn't that all that mattered? My misfortune did not lower me. It all raised me, on the contrary. I must have fought superbly. How many times

a day she had pictured me leading my men to the attack. I had been intoxicated, had I not, by all that life offered of sublime sensations. I should not assume my former scepticism again, even in play. What a lot we should have to tell each other when—and Heaven grant that the day might be near at hand—we met again.

I read and re-read these six pages. I never tired of assuring myself of my joy and revelling in it. My heart melted as a result of the relief, and turned towards the wall; I wept the sweet tears which had been ready to flow for the last ten days.

I now recognised clearly what I had dreaded and could smile at it. A revival of the dry mistrust which was dissipated at a word from Jeannine!

This miracle of her persistent affection seemed to me the simplest and most natural reality. Since the milk of human kindness was not an empty saying! And then one might have mistrusted another, but she, like myself, had deliberately raised herself above the common sphere in which men's feelings move. How little the scruples and hesitations of average souls could count for in comparison with the mute vow which bound us. We belonged to each other, whatever might happen!

But, nevertheless, when the first transport was over, a vague feeling of unrest returned to skim the surface of my mind. I was insatiable. It seemed to me that I might have looked for a more tender and impassioned abandonment—for some involuntary avowal. . . .

And then, no! On thinking it over, I had no difficulty in convincing myself that it was her modesty which forbade her to declare herself. I myself had never dared to put it into writing. No; our engage-

ment would be ratified by a hand-clasp, by the chaste exchange of words.

I wrote her eight pages that same evening. Our correspondence was resumed. Each of us now, certainly waited for the other's letter to arrive before answering it—and the posts were still uncertain, a week sometimes went by without bringing the looked-for letter.

I was not without regret for the time when our love had found a way to express itself, every, or almost every day. We had ceased to move amongst those unique circumstances when not an hour must be lost in pouring out all one's heart, since each letter, received or despatched, might be the last. This was the return to normal conditions; letters between the betrothed before the ring has been given. It was at least something on which to feed the certainty of our happiness.

Time went on and on. At the end of a fortnight they had given my leg a thorough dressing for the first time. The compresses, with the aid of hot water, had come off more quickly, and given me less pain than I had feared they might. Bujard congratulated me on the condition of my wound. There was no trace of suppuration. Three weeks more and I should get up!

I smiled at his words of encouragement. I marvelled at feeling nothing at the severed stump but a sort of tickling which was sometimes, by the way, almost intolerable. The feeling that my right thigh had nothing to counter-balance it was very queer too.

The occupants of our ward had nearly all recovered. Some more beds were added. They tried to make

more room, and sent away a great many of those who could stand up. Cadieu was despatched to a convalescent home. He went hobbling off, much amused by his crutches. And merriment went with him.

Many of the new arrivals appeared exhausted and worn out. They arrived in an infected state—it was the end of October—from the ghastly slaughters in Belgium. There were several cases of tetanus and gangrene. I remember a big fellow, belonging to the naval brigade, who screamed with pain all night, and died at dawn.

I found this promiscuousness very trying, and lost strength again. My friend Bujard noticed it, and, after having consulted me, arranged for me to have a little room to myself. I took leave of the sister, Ste. Thérèse.

To begin with I missed the fresh air in the ward. I was reduced to the society of my father as sole companion, and he was not well, because he had had an attack of choking one evening, in the thick of the battle of the Yser, when he had thought our line had been broken through. Bujard had warned me that he was threatened with angina pectoris.

And yet with what solicitude the poor man surrounded me. He was by my side from eight o'clock in the morning onwards. He never left me during the day, and had obtained permission to have his meals brought up there. He tried everything imaginable to alleviate the monotony of my long convalescence. He joined a library so that I might have books, and tired himself by reading to me for hours together. In the end I had to implore Bujard to forbid him to

read. He bought me a quantity of maps of different scales, and we tried to follow the situation, and the manoeuvres of our five principal armies during the immortal days at the beginning of September. We marked out the actual front with little flags.

We talked, too. I evoked certain scenes from my childhood, our Lorraine, Ebermenil. It caused my father frightful distress to think that the enemy were still there. "But not for long," he growled, grinding his teeth.

If I pressed the subject and recalled some happy occasion on which our dear departed ones had figured at our sides, then I used to see him fall into a deep day-dream, into which I dared not break. He belonged to those whose grief is frozen and taciturn, more heart-rending, perhaps, than ours, which is assuaged when we give vent to it.

I realised anew the difference in our two natures—not without regret! I should never have ventured, I thought, to allow him even a glimpse of the surprising evolution which had made a new man of me. It would have revolted him to learn from what depths I had started, and all that had been needed to bring me to this state of grace in which he had maintained himself without an effort, for more than forty years.

Jeannine, everything brought back the longing for your beloved presence! You alone knew me, such as I had been and such as I was. What pride, just think, for us two, to ascertain how, little by little, at the seat of my love for you, all these virtues had blossomed in my soul. You would persuade me, perhaps, that I bore the germs in my heart, but that they could never have flowered in the etiolating atmosphere in which my life had been spent.

Stirred by such thoughts, I suddenly became more sensible to the paternal affection. What nurse would have set her wits to work in such a touching fashion? He tried to remember how my mother used to treat me during my long illnesses in former days.

One morning, he put a pack of cards on my table and timidly proposed a game of piquet.

"A good idea!" I said. "Let's draw!"

He puckered his forehead and played attentively, and won. And I could see myself again as a child—a child playing like this with my mother, caressing her beautiful white hands. I could have seized and kissed this old man's wrinkled hands. The unique tenderness of parents, which one must hasten to enjoy! My mother had passed away years and years ago—and as for him, the last on earth of the beings whom I perpetuated, how much time would slip away before they left him, having lived his life, between four planks? I was harrowed in advance. I made a vow to do all that was in my power to sweeten the days—restricted, alas, in number—which still remained to him. ,

CHAPTER III

A SUNLIT CONVALESCENCE

ONE afternoon, towards two o'clock, my father took his hat, and said to me, in rather a mysterious tone: "I must go out on an errand. I'll be back in a moment."

Half an hour later I became aware of shuffling going on outside my door. Somebody knocked.

"Come in!"

A little boy, dressed in black, appeared on the threshold. My heart gave a bound. That prominent forehead, where fair curls rolled, that straight, brilliant gaze. Victor! Victor, at five years old. Victor as he had been when my eyes had opened on him as a little child.

It was his son—little Robert.

Behind him was my sister-in-law. She came straight up to my bed, and bent down, raising her long widow's veil. We kissed each other, and I demanded my little niece Brigitte, who was shy and was burying her face in her mother's skirts.

The conversation immediately started off, quite naturally and delightfully, free of its whilom reserve. We ingenuously confessed that we had learnt to know each other, and how we had felt the mutual affection grow, in the course of these terrible months.

Madeleine had come to stay at Vichy for a few days.

"We will give you new courage," she said.

"I'm not lacking in it! You're the one who needs it, poor little sister."

"Oh! I have enough for three."

It was true enough. I was struck by her spirit of determination. And I had thought her in danger of giving way entirely beneath the blow. She spoke of nothing but the future; of her plans; of the education of her children. She thought of going to live at Versailles: the rents were not so high there as in Paris, they would be near the town, and the Lycée Hoche. For she wanted to keep Robert with her, in order that the whole family should cling together.

As my eyes were again drawn irresistibly to the little boy, she said: "Isn't he like——"

She did not complete the sentence. Tears perled on her eyelashes. It was one of the few allusions she allowed herself, to her great sorrow.

I told her that her children would find a second father in me.

"He counted on it," she assured me.

And she showed me a note which Victor had written before leaving St. Mihiel; a few lines in which he confided those dearest to him on earth, to my charge. What instinct warned him that he would fall; that I should be preserved?

I reverently welcomed this sacred bequest. When my father had gone I should be the head of the family. New duties which I hailed with delight. And in a short time, I said to myself, Madeleine would find in Jeannine a friend, more than a friend. I think that if we had been alone it would have been to her, first of all, that I should have revealed my secret.

Those were calm days perfumed by sympathy and friendship. I had to tell the story of my campaign in full detail. Not even the children seemed bored as they listened.

Dear mites they were! Too quiet and good. I sent to a neighbouring bazaar for some toys for them. Then I drew up a plan for the future.

I asked my sister-in-law what she meant to do for the winter. It was impossible for her to go back home. The enemy had just laid hands on St. Mihiel.

"Stay in Paris," she said.

"How depressing that would be!"

I pretended to be seized with a sudden inspiration. "Suppose we all went off to the Riviera for a time, for a rest?"

The suggestion was carried unanimously. It was a landmark set up . . . To draw all my belongings down there. It seemed to me that in accompanying me, they would share my joy. As for me—could I hesitate? The Landrys' departure for Antibes, seriously delayed by certain complications, was fixed for the following month. I had reminded Jeannine of her promise to come round by the Bourbon line. The matter was arranged.

I fondly imagined that I should have recovered by that date. Bujard spoke to me every day of the marvellous apparatus which was to disguise my misfortune.

My sister left again with her children, recalled to Paris by various purchases and other matters. The sweetness she had brought with her persisted. Those were radiant days.

I began to get up. First a foot out of bed, nothing

more. My father who was still vigorous lent me the support of his arm. My head swam when I stood up. I was just able to reach an arm-chair, and doubted whether my strength could ever come back. I was especially bewildered by the strange lack of equilibrium.

I held the crutches in abhorrence. I should never get accustomed to that. Directly it was possible, Bujard brought me a wooden stump. Frightful! However, it was a way of progressing. My left leg was able to get exercise, and regain strength, little by little. I walked up and down the landings, and the hotel garden.

I was measured for a jointed limb. Bujard had told me of an American firm which was supplying both groups of belligerents, so he assured me. I sent my order to them.

The delay demanded had seemed to me very reasonable. But, when I first began to go into the town I fell a prey to the embarrassing compassion of the passers-by. They nudged each other, when they met me.

“Another one!”

“Poor fellow!”

I, who aspired to losing myself in the crowd, like other people!

I happened just then to come across the prospectus of an English firm, which offered to provide the whole thing complete in a fortnight, at a price defying all competition!

“A hoax!” Bujard warned me.

It couldn't be helped. I was consumed with impatience. I wrote, enclosing my cheque. We should see. It would be well worth the twelve pounds it would cost me.

Those were happy weeks, I repeat. I went before a Board; I was passed, and left the hospital. I was free! And had the satisfaction of feeling that I had paid my debt to the full.

I wrote letters, and received them. Madeleine wrote me jewels of sisterly affection. Guillaumin, for his part, sent me picturesque epistles. They had had a rough time again, at the beginning of October, round Champieu and De Roye.

Since then, trench warfare had been inaugurated: they were settling down for the winter. There was not a word of complaint, simply the tranquil and delightful keenness he had always shown. The morale of the men was intact. And they had had so few casualties during the last five weeks. They were well fed. The only drawback was the lack of heating arrangements!

I replied to him at length, and sent a real letter, too, to each man who had signed the collective post-card which I have already mentioned.

I asked my sister-in-law to go and call on Guillaumin's sister in the little flat she had in the Gobelins. They talked for a whole hour about him and me, like firm friends; and Madeleine managed to procure some piano lessons for the other—a real feat!

The postal arrangements had improved considerably. Neither Jeannine nor I lost any time. Directly a letter arrived—quick!—the answer was written. Our eagerness was more intense than ever.

The German offensive in the North had not come to an end. The fighting round Ypres had caused us a recurrence of anguish. My father had another attack one evening when we once more thought—from reticences in the *communiqué*—that our line had been

forced and penetrated, and that the road to Calais was open.

A few words from Jeannine—a supplementary card, that one—were what reassured us, before all the papers. An aide-de-camp from Foch had just been dining with them, and had given them details. The situation had been critical, desperate, one day, but it had been tardily re-established the next day, and was now consolidated, and no longer gave any cause for alarm.

I read the whole passage to my father. He gave a sigh of relief.

"We are saved, then! The source of your information seems reliable. Is it one of your friends, who's written to you?"

"A friend, yes."

Later on, quite soon, it would be sweet to open my heart to him, to claim his blessing on the daughter I should bring him.

The Landrys had again put off the date of their departure. Jeannine gave me to understand, with a certain emphasis, that some business matters could not be settled. I had the delicacy never to ask for details.

This delay suited me very well. I would have given a lot for them not to join us before the ghastly "stump" had been relegated to the rubbish heap. Jeannine had, perhaps, guessed as much.

Oh! our correspondence at that point. I cannot prevent myself from returning to the subject. Its tone of complete confidence, of youthful abandonment. Oh! my loving beloved; arrayed in every attraction, who did not intoxicate me solely by the enchantment of her clear life and warm seduction, nor solely by the

goodness which all her being irradiated. She was the intellectual companion, too—the complement, for which man's instinct yearns, and which he discovers so rarely.

Sometimes, after having come into collision with my father who could not be shaken in his opinions, I would turn to her in delight and admire her broader outlook. For instance, he did not desire, or even admit, the possibility of peace or a truce before the enemy had been completely crushed. According to him, the necessary conditions of the future Treaty were that the Central Powers should be dismembered; large territories annexed; and our frontier extended as far as the Rhine. The brutal law of force. The vanquished must bow his head. While, as for her it must be noted that she cursed the cruel blindness of the Teuton caste which provoked the catastrophe just as much as I did. But she followed me—far better than that—she boldly out-stripped me in my desire simply for the repression of a minor race, in my wish for the future re-establishment of concord among all nations, not excepting even that one. Did she not want to convince me that each great race in turn let itself be ensnared by the mirage of universal hegemony. Look at us, under Napoleon! In fifty or a hundred years, we should see these Germans rallied to our republican wisdom.

What joy I experienced in playing lightly upon all the chords of this young soul, in hearing each one of them vibrate in harmony with me.

I will quote one touching incident. She it was who sent me, by telegram, too, the text of my promotion, as it appeared in the *Gazette* on November the 23rd. So that was why she had sounded me so

dexterously for a long time now. I had told her what I knew, what my captain proposed. I thought no more about it, instead of which, she had studied the lists for weeks and weeks, with the perseverance of a woman in love.

The English firm fulfilled their contract, the order was delivered on the promised date. Bujard shook his head when he examined it. Just as he had expected. A ready-made model!

As for me, the apparatus attracted me. I put it on hurriedly, and having pulled on my trousers, went and planted myself in front of the wardrobe looking-glass, which no longer reflected the former, monstrous and incomplete apparition. Upright and firmly planted on my feet, and well-balanced, I admired myself, restored to my manly dignity. Now, Jeannine might come! I could not help telling her of the joy which was running over in me. I jokingly told her that I had to think before being sure which leg was missing.

She replied with the announcement that they were to start on their journey in a few days.

The fulness of life! The rapture of it! I was about to attain my supreme end, and was exalted by the prospect of it. The time was accomplished. I had escaped the wind of death which had felled so many others. The war might still be in progress—I must ask pardon for this return of egoism!—At a time when my brothers were still suffering and perishing, I awaited, with heart enthralled, the coming of my betrothed.

How strange is destiny. I looked back upon the weeks spent, not so very long ago, beside this girl. I

had not had an inkling, then, of what she was to be to me. How fantastic it seemed that I should be beholden to that brutal separation. How near I had come to neglecting happiness!

But for the War——!

I dared to look this terrible truth in the face. Thus are hearts tempered anew. I had had to undergo the dread ordeal by fire, which consumes the greater number, whence a few issue, purified.

CHAPTER IV

THE AWAKENING

SUCH was the dream I lived in. To-day, when I go over that time in retrospect, I ask myself whether I did not experience any anxiety. Not the least. Not for an instant did I see my sky overcast.

I was harshly undeceived on one point though. In using it I found out how second-rate the English article was. It answered the purpose all right as long as I kept still, but light as it seemed it was necessary to exert my hip to work it, which made me walk with a kind of unsightly swing and very quickly tired me.

I got into the habit of going out during the best hours of the day while the fine weather lasted. Once outside, I walked slowly, putting on the air of a loiterer. As uninitiated passers-by might well think I was merely slightly lame, I now had to be doubly vigilant about avoiding the least contact with the crowd. Alas! I was very unsteady; twice I nearly fell when someone bumped into me, and people did not apologise; the mufti I had taken to again seemed to rob me of the right to any consideration.

Who would believe that I almost got as far as to regret the wooden stump? My last hopes were fixed on the American firm. I congratulated myself upon not having cancelled my order. A fellow-sufferer had just been introduced to me, who had been supplied

with a leg by them, and I marvelled at his young and supple carriage.

Why did I make a point of telling Jeannine of my disillusionment? Perhaps in order to get the answer, "What are you worrying about?" With ambitious coquetry I boasted in advance of the wonders expected from the other firm.

The reply was delayed for six days, and when it came was only four pages. The Landrys were putting the finishing touch to their preparations. There was not a single allusion to my infirmity, which I had told her was well on the way to being cured. No doubt she had made a rule never to broach the subject. Having once and for all given me proof of her tender pity she wished thenceforward to spare me the humiliation of feeling that she even thought of it.

Some days slipped by. I had written to her again in an affectionate tone. Though tempted to give her to understand that it would be less painful to show myself to her in a fortnight's time, I refrained from making such a mistake. That was a secondary matter. Only let her come! let her come! Oh, my love!

At this point, there was a long silence on her part. Must it be put down to the postal service again? No, we received our other letters from Paris quite regularly.

At the end of ten days I wrote her a line, saying that I was anxious. No answer—what could I make of it? I was seized with apprehension. Was she ill perhaps? But I should have been told about it. Had some accident happened to her? That was more likely. If so, what was it? My thoughts wandered, incapable of fixing themselves.

Then, one morning, just as I got out of bed, the waiter brought me a card. What power there is in

presentiments! As I took it from him I distinctly saw another, the one I had got from Jeannine at F—the day before we started. I immediately thought—why, I wonder? that was the first, and this—this, the last!

It was not the Paris postmark. I undid it slowly, pretending—on whose account?—to be unmoved. One page, no more. It was headed Juan-les-Pins, December 17, 1914. Jeannine expressed her regret at the fact that they had been prevented from making the detour they intended, because the time-tables fitted in so awkwardly. Her grandmother was not very well, as a result of a great deal of worry, and found the journey long enough without adding to it. They had arrived the day before yesterday on the Riviera, which was not justifying its reputation, since the sun was absent. It lacked joyousness above everything. She added that she could not tear her thoughts away from the cold Northern regions, where so much youth, and all the promise of the future was succumbing. She ended by expressing the hope that we should see each other again some day. There was no allusion to our travelling plans, which I had mentioned to her several times.

I stood still, thunderstruck. I mechanically began to read over the lines again. The letters were dancing. I searched for an unexpected meaning in them. I refused to admit . . . But the conviction was secretly gaining ground in my mind.

When I got to the signature again, there was not an unsteady stroke. The evolution was complete; I was ripe at last to understand. It was the emanation of a distant, a prodigiously distant being. How could I ever have thought—? My simplicity amazed me. Here, endless overwhelming forebodings occurred to my

mind. The imperceptibly, but totally changed tone of her letters; the note of friendship substituted for that of love; never a word in reference to my misfortune; the grandmother always refraining from adding a personal message, the long-delayed opportunity of seeing me again. Lastly, the brutal decision: these four sentences of dismissal.

I leant on the window looking over the hotel garden from the second floor. A bare lawn, and leafless trees. A cold and dreary wind was blowing, this winter morning. I pictured her, too, at her window opening on to the sea. My thoughts sought her thoughts. Yes, I wanted her to feel me moved by her cold, heart-breaking epistle at that moment. Ah, and if she could have read my heart, she would have seen that it held for her nothing but a desperate, resigned devotion.

Move her to pity? A dead ambition. Demand an explanation? What was the good? I saw it quite clearly. Curse her, blaspheme against her? How far that was from my thoughts. I did not accuse her of treachery. It seemed to me certain that at the time of the uplifting struggle she had dreamt of me as her bridegroom of to-morrow. But since I had been damaged. My God! What could I have reproached her with?

Had I still supposed myself worthy to inspire contentment in a youthful creature, inexperienced and perfect? When no engagement bound us! For on what foundations had I built? On nothing more than an odd avowal or two hidden here and there between the lines. Sand scattered by the wind! I might read over her letters, those written during the last few months and even those at the beginning. When once my own ardour had abated I should not find in

them either oath or promise; there was nothing there, nothing had ever been expressed but a sisterly affection.

It occurred to my mind that more than one girl of former days, brought up in the pious ideas of devotion and self-sacrifice, would have felt herself especially bound to proclaim as her fiancé the man who had suffered at the hands of Fate—inspirations to be respected, but, I admitted, out of date. This generation, less sensible—I have already said Jeannine was not the least—to the impress of religion, showed more common sense. It was permissible for a child of our century, however generous she might be, to trust to time to cure all heartaches, in others and in herself, to aspire to a happiness other than sacrifice.

Jeannine might have suffered, might be suffering still. Yes, she must regret that what was not, might not be. It was possible that she might carry away a picture of me which would illuminate a chaste corner of her memory: an idol that she had not been able to bring herself to destroy by seeing me again. It was Reason. I bowed to the sovereign I always recognised. Does one not usually end by repenting of a sacrifice? I glanced into the glass—I have said that I was not dressed: ugliness, a lack of harmony, weakness. If I had given her my arm, she would have been the one to support me. What shame, what remorse even, there would have been for me, in paralysing this creature, so vividly alive, in eternally hearing her pitied, she who was born to be envied.

I dressed with my mind a blank. I abstained, when I was ready, from knocking at the door of the room next to mine, where my father slept. I was afraid of letting him see the distracted look on my face.

I went downstairs and out of doors. Where should

I go to? I avoided the frequented streets, and the park where I liked to sit. It was a long round. How my leg weighed on me. But I forced myself to walk quickly, as long as I continued to meet any one. When I got beyond the suburbs some power or other abruptly ceased to support me. Faint, and at the end of my strength, I was only just able to reach a heap of stones, upon which I sank down.

There was a nip in the air. The sun, like a dull ball, appeared behind a livid curtain of cloud.

What a feeling of irremediable collapse! All my strength, physical and moral, was annulled. My despair alone lived on in the depths of my frozen heart. For a long while I experienced a secret, harrowing joy in imagining the future, such as it might have been. My sorrow was exasperated by turning over such visions in my mind, and reached a state of paroxysm. I could not bear it. I got up, picked up my stick, and went on along the road.

Not far away, beyond some fields, a line of poplars made me guess where the Allier lay. I was drawn on by a fatal longing to reach the bank of the river. Poor soul, born but to disappear!

Swollen by the autumn rains, the river filled its huge bed to the brink. It was a glaucous, sinister stretch of water. Eddying foam was swept along on a strong current.

I was tempted. I approached the bank. It fell away in a steep slope towards the stream which swished along it with a monotonous gurgle. I planted my stick at the extreme edge among the fragments of slate. I leant over—it was horribly alluring—and I granted myself a certain delay.

What a stirring moment that was while my fate

hung in the balance. I had come to the end of my tether. What had brought me there? Was it not the paltry idea of bringing remorse to birth in Jeannine's heart? But what would she know of my wretched fate? And why revenge myself so basely? I scrupled to annihilate the vestige of strength which I constituted. Lastly, there was the disdain for an act of romantic impotence.

And then, what pulled me up short was the thought of the old man, who must have heard me go out, who was alarmed no doubt already, whose life hung upon my return. Then I sat down. Ceasing to hypnotise myself by gazing at the torrent eating away the bank at my feet, my eyes strayed to the horizon. By a stretch of the imagination it seemed to me that I dominated the field where my individual happiness had been shattered.

The War! Had I not come—I remember the day before—to deify the word! Yes, it was a progressive spell. The War! While childishly attributing the rejuvenation of my soul to it, I had ended by seeing in it the fairy who was cruel to be kind. So many thinkers and poets had bowed down to this terrible goddess, before me.

My aberration fell to pieces. The War! The abominations which were really contained in this term rose up and quelled me.

Those villages, blazing like torches. The Meuse rolling by with its purple slime; the woods of Montrolles with their grasses stained with mottled patches violet, the traces of our brothers massacred there. O death, sole enemy of man, sneering at the orgies of the sword! So many beings who moved and loved, struck off the rolls, so many lights put out! De Valpic,

the great-hearted, and Henriot and little Frémont; my excellent Bouillon, Prunelle, Icard; Descroix and Playoust, too, all or almost all, without discrimination—a crowd of friends and companions, now grimacing underground. And the anonymous multitude, those foul masses of corpses whose odour had pursued us all through our fighting from end to end. All that, oh! merely a prologue! As if it was enough that a million young men should be sacrificed. To death, to death with their elders, the fellows from thirty to forty. The trench fighting instituted, which would last how long, O God! The sons of the hostile races, face to face in their burrows, spitting murder and hatred at each other, tracing with their blood the baleful line of fire. Frenzy gaining the two fronts little by little, the zones of slaughter being displaced and stretched out, others being made. Where would the conflagration end? A craze for butchery sweeping through the world. Would there be an acre in Europe, to-morrow, which had not seen human remains decaying beneath the beaks of carrion crows, or which did not contain them in its depths, infecting the sources of their poisoned juices?

Ah! when the awakening came at last, and the diplomats, old vultures, were collected round the council-board to talk, they might congratulate themselves as they audited the balance sheet. Broken up, ground and crushed, these two, three, four generations of men who might have been great, and collaborated in the common cause. So many wounded who would soon succumb, wan wrecks, and so many others who, like myself, would only drag out the shadow of an existence. And all the rest! The ravaged homes, the wives abandoned to the terrors of their widowhood,

the old parents dying with curses on their lips, the children delivered over without guidance to life's buffetings, the surplus girls especially, deprived of their natural associates, devoted to the sorrows of debauchery. With many of those who came back safely, the mind at least would be affected, their faith in work sapped, their brutal instincts let loose, and their desire for immediate enjoyment aroused. The public wealth destroyed, want bringing revolt in its train, the emasculated nations incapable of recovering, or even of governing themselves. The snare of revolutions, of frightful social convulsions. What could one depend upon henceforth? There would be no law or rule of any sort. The religions, Art, Science, all these would be humiliated before Force. The Ideal broken and trampled underfoot. An infected breath tainting the sacred legacies of the past. The genius of destruction hovering over a civilisation in ruins. That was what War meant!

A monstrous survival of primitive errors. How I abhorred them all of a sudden, the politics and morals which revere this scourge of God.

As to war raising the hearts of individuals and nations, alas, who could answer for it? For one soul purified, how many others would be vilified! And, above all, how terrible was the remedy, a thousand times worse than the complaint.

War might be necessary, and it was in this case, for the defence of our native land. Then it might give birth to the most noble effervescence. Then in its radiance virtues might thrive like plants beneath a tropical sun. But it remained no less the supreme calamity; the triumph of the powers of Death.

Care must be taken not to magnify it, not to flatter

the fluctuating mind of the nations with bellicose dreams. We must needs greet a like catastrophe with a fiercely hostile heart, abhor it, blaspheme against it, we miserable creatures, who had but one life to live, one brief chance of being happy.

CHAPTER V

A GIRL OF 1915

My sister has rejoined us at Vichy with her children. We are to leave together for the South. The idea no longer holds any attraction for me, everything draws me in the opposite direction. But I cannot give my reasons. I pretend to be waiting for the delivery of my order from the American firm, not to want to move before it has arrived. Very well! The excuse serves for a few days. But now the limb is delivered. Ten times preferable to the other, light and strong at the same time. This knee that bends is a marvel! Though it matters little enough to me now, it is true.

How am I to withstand the family urgency now? In vain I argue that I am still weak. They all persist in extolling the advantage to be derived from a change of air. And then the tickets have been taken and our rooms engaged at Cannes in one of the only hotels not transformed into hospitals. I gain a week more. Here is Christmas, and the New Year's Day, so many All Souls' Days! Oh well, I shall have to give in.

A palace on the Antibes road; a park with luxuriant palms; a far-reaching view over the turquoise-coloured sea. Very few people—a diminished staff; war prices; besides, my father is making us a present of this holiday.

My sister-in-law at once makes inquiries about less pretentious quarters, where we may end the winter. Getting wind of this project, I hasten to remonstrate. She is surprised; what's the matter? Do I no longer like this part? Didn't I choose it myself? I admit that I have changed my mind—a convalescent's weak nerves—that I dream of less well-known neighbourhoods, Corsica or the Morocco coast.

It is quite true: I burn to escape from all that oppresses me on this coast. I avoid letting my eyes rest upon the headland of La Croisette. I can picture, too vividly, the bay behind it with its silver slopes, the Cape d'Antibes stretching out into the sea, with the white lighthouse at La Groupe, and, facing towards us amid the tangled mass of verdure, that dwelling so often described to me.

These associations overwhelm me. Be still, my heart, be still! This is the sun which warms her, these are the waves whose murmur lulls her to sleep, the air which quickens her. I cannot breath here!

My people, who enjoy being at Cannes, give way to my express wish: we are to leave again.

To-morrow will be our last day here. I am seated on the promenade. Where are the luxurious cars with their insolent footmen? Where are the dandies in white flannel, the fair pedestrians in toilettes fit for a queen? The patrons of the Riviera, this year, are those poor soldiers in faded uniforms.

I find myself near the place where the sea-gulls used, formerly, to whirl, catching in their flight the scraps which little girls threw to them. They have deserted the shore. They are playing together in the distance, skimming the gleaming surface of the waves.

I am waiting for Madeleine and my small nephew and niece. Here they come—she with her long veil. The passers-by think, as they meet her, of their losses of yesterday and to-morrow.

“A letter for you, Michel.”

“Thanks.”

I take it nonchalantly. Where is the news, to-day, with any power to stir me?

But the envelope torn the blood throbs in my temples! I can't believe . . .

It is from Madame Landry!

She writes that she has just seen my name in the *Journal des Étrangers* (so it still appears?). We were expected here. She and her grand-daughter would be delighted if I would go to see them, delighted, too, if my family would accompany me. She proposed a day, the day after to-morrow.

I don't know where I am. My hand tightens on the letter. Jeannine has taken care not to add a word. My heart swells with bitterness. But why this proceeding?

I shall not go! I cannot go!

Oh, my sister, the only friend left to me, why did I feel a longing to confide in someone, at the sight of your sweet melancholy? I began by joking:

“Halloa, an invitation!”

You searchingly fixed your eyes, full of affection on me.

Drawing a quadrant in the sand with the end of my stick, in a toneless voice, which I force myself to render frivolous, I have told Madeleine this story. But by some subtle feeling of bashfulness, I have not made myself out as ingenuous—I should have blushed for it

—as I was. I have told her that directly I saw I had been damaged I had ceased to indulge in a hope grown fond. Our continued correspondence had been a consolation prize. Then when she had tired even of this game I lost interest in it too.

Madeleine has said to me, in her calm voice:

“It seems to me that nothing is lost.”

I have protested.

“I shan’t go!”

“You must go.”

“What’s the use?”

“Who can read in another’s heart?” she murmured.

And she confides in me that on the day when Victor had asked for her hand in marriage, her mother had sent for her to consult her, as was seemly. And she, who loved him—and how she loved her young, intrepid soldier! This union was her one wish—she began to sob, stammering “No,” amid her tears. They were unfathomable creatures, certainly!

But I smiled at my misery, and at this senseless renewal of intercourse.

Why have I obeyed her? Why have I got into this train alone? She would come next time, she assured me prettily. The rear carriage without a top races along, raising clouds of white dust. I catch frequent glimpses of the radiant stretch of water. Here is the Juan Vallauris Gulf. Now we are skirting the edges of the coast, the pearly foam frolicking almost at our feet on the pale strand.

I force myself to think of nothing. That would be best. I come to grief over it, and my thoughts are torture. Why am I going there? Out of cowardice? Or else is it a remnant of hope? No! We’ll dismiss

that idea! Rather, I think, in order to prove to myself that I am not afraid to suffer.

I stiffen myself. I will be correct and cold. Cold, poor wretch! Just now my tears welled up at the sight of the sunlit road where there might some day have gambolled lovely children, born to us.

I have got out, and have slowly traversed the deserted village, and rounded the tall pine-wood. My footsteps sink into the earth—an inconvenience shared by everyone. My jointed leg flexes at the difficulties in the ground, and does not call attention to my drawback. I just seem tired by my walk.

I have forbidden myself to think, to procrastinate, or to hesitate, or I should not have got as far as this threshold. Just as well, since I am embarked on this fantastic adventure. No backing out of it! For a soldier!

There it is. I recognise the gates, overhung with ivy, from the description they gave me. Here it is! I ring, with wonderful, unexpected calmness. My heart has stopped beating quickly, since my fate is sealed.

The sound of footsteps. Is it she? No, the maid coming to open the gate to me. Was I expected as early as this?

A short and fairly steep pathway brings us to the flight of steps leading up to the villa. No one at the windows—luckily! As a matter of fact, my careless carriage cloaks my lameness.

I have been taken into the drawing-room, and the maid has gone to tell— A prettily furnished room, unobtrusively luxurious, and smacking of the old *bourgeoisie*, of matured and refined taste. Old furniture—flowers in modern vases. I go up to a

table with photographs standing on it. Here is, or, rather, are hers. This one dates back to two years ago. She seems a child, with her hair down her back. Thus it was that she entered upon life.

I am struck by a pastel on the wall—a gracious portrait of a young woman. That resemblance—Her mother, no doubt; her mother, who had died when she was twenty-four.

A door opens. It is Madame Landry, as slim and sprightly as ever, in her dark gown, but she has a tired expression, it is true. Is she still an invalid? She denies it, in a few disconnected sentences, and seems even more perturbed than I am.

Jeannine is just coming down," she says.

I ask: "How is she? Quite fit?"

"Very."

Then, recovering herself:

"I've been annoyed—with her."

But here is Jeannine herself.

I admire my self-control, for I get up and go towards her. There is nothing constrained in my gait; I hardly drag my leg. Dazzled, and yet at the same time clear-sighted, I look at her with a prejudiced eye. I do not think her as lovely as she was.

I have bowed and pressed her hand; a commonplace greeting has been exchanged. The little brother has already appeared, and is deafening me with a crowd of questions which I answer good-naturedly. How easily it passes, this moment, which I had dreaded so much. We might be back at Ballaigues: the tone of courtesy and irony—and of indifference—recovered.

A strange hour. The conversation does not flag. Mention is made of my family, whose regrets I am supposed to have brought. Then I plunge into praise

of this heaven-blest country where they pass each winter. The grandmother interrupts me. This season is the last they will spend here.

“Really?”

Jeannine changes the subject.

The conversation, having wavered, naturally returns to the War. When will it end? In the spring? Yes, after the Big Push! We return to the first weeks. They ply me with questions. What have I seen? At first, I decline to be drawn out. They insist—I let myself go. They listen, and ask for details. Here is the perfect audience, interested and impassioned. Even technical details do not repel them, this sister and this daughter of soldiers, who have been staking out the maps with little flags; they, too.

I question them in my turn. It pleased me to hear them describing Paris' proud bearing at the time of our reverses. They have a right to speak of it, as they live there. When I mention our meeting with the two young Red Cross members at Rosny—

“It might have been me,” says Jeannine. “I was at St. Denis that morning.”

Heavens! I do not know what I had feared or desired. I become expansive. My mind is set at ease. What, is that Jeannine, who is listening to me, leaning her chin in her hand? Is it her pure, pensive gaze which mine meets without embarrassment?

And the grandmother is standing up. In the most natural tone in the world, she asks her grand-daughter to show me round the garden.

Jeannine hesitates, and looks at her. I wonder, at this moment, if Madame Landry has ever heard of our letters, if she sees the tragic undercurrents to this frivolous scene which is being enacted.

Jeannine is still considering. Is she afraid that the walk may tire me? I get up, and reassure her in advance. She blushes. The grandmother apologises for not accompanying us—the doctor forbids it.

So I call little André—I only forestall Jeannine—that there may be a third in the party.

The child jumps down the steps. I walk down gingerly, holding on to the rail; Jeannine, with her usual tact, more slowly still.

This garden is more like a park. Trees of twenty species meet here, mingled in a medley, with the luxuriance of primeval forests—palms, maples, and olives; and I am made to guess the name of magnolias and mastic trees. I admire the tangles of lichens and aloes and the "mimosa alley," running between two hedges of gold.

How sad and exquisitely sweet this loitering is. Our futile topics lend it a melancholy charm. I should like to be able to detain the fleeting moments. We are going up to the house again. I am going away—and I shall never come back.

"I don't like our garden any more," Jeannine suddenly declared. "I've not been down into it three times since we got there."

"Why not?"

"It doesn't belong to us now. The villa is sold."

"An accomplished fact?"

"Yes, with everything belonging to it. To some Americans, from the first of February."

This astonishes me:

"As soon as that?"

"We had to."

"Where are you going to spend the rest of the winter then?"

"We shall have to go back to Paris."

André seems bored by our pace, which is not lively enough for him. He outstrips us, comes back to fetch us, and covers twice the distance we do.

"I am sure he's dying to show me his playground."

"Probably," Jeannine acquiesced.

We reach a lawn. Here is a piece of ground which has been dug up, and a chalked line.

"How far can you jump now, André?"

"More than four yards," he exclaims.

He leaves his straw hat in our care, goes off to get room, takes a run, and jumps; and immediately turns round, triumphant, the four yards cleared.

"Bravo! You are getting on."

"Oh, it'll be a long time before I can jump like you."

He stops short, biting his lip. Too late. We all three redden, and recall that summer's day when, in compliance with a request from Jeannine, I had taken off my coat, and jumped nearly five yards on the sand. To-day? Alas, to-day!

Jeannine points out the croquet lawn to me, in passing.

"And what about tennis?"

"We've given up playing."

I begin to feel slightly tired. Jeannine, who suspects it, slackens her speed again, gracefully and unaffectedly. But it is heart-breaking for me—I who have such a vivid recollection of the rhythm of her usual pace. And had I not seen her at Ballaigues, challenging her brother to race with her, and beating him with ease?

The round is finished. We are going in. André proposes:

"Suppose we take Mr. Dreher to the Observatory?"

"Just what I meant to do," she says. "We'll have a rest—I'm worn out."

Is she putting it on, to make me forget my fatigue, or is she really tired out? Her rosy colour has certainly paled very suddenly. Her pure face is troubled, like limpid water which has been agitated.

Mounting some steps, we gain a shady retreat, bordering on and overlooking the road. A parasol, three chairs, a seat, an iron railing.

Jeannine has dropped into a chair. I have seated myself beside her. Our eyes roam over the stretch of country in front of us.

The short January afternoon is already drawing to a close. The sun is sinking behind the islands, which look like deep-sea monsters, with purple scales. The West is bathed in a luminous pallor, even the tracery of the Estérel is hardly discernible out yonder.

At the bottom of the orange bay, there lie white houses with red roofs and blazing windows, flaming as if the darkness were not near at hand. And that is the way of my destiny. The last moment of radiance, on the threshold of the eternal night!

Jeannine is still silent. André chatters, and I am glad of it, and keep him up to it. I profess an interest in the hairy cactus creeping along the wall. I ask him the names of certain plants, and pretend to get muddled in order to make him laugh.

Is it I who am talking and joking, I, who smile? There is another desperate I, coiled up at the centre of my being.

A tinkle. The door-bell. André peeps between the branches.

"I bet it's Maurice!"

I mechanically ask: "Who's Maurice?"

"A little neighbour," Jeannine replies.

"Yes, that's him all right."

The child bounds down the steps and leaves us alone. How awkward! Just the very thing which should have been avoided. I try to fill up the silence with a commonplace remark—Good God! This moment of *tête-à-tête*, for which my whole being longed in desperation in the hours of Death!

André's voice makes itself heard. He comes running back.

"I say, Jeannine, he wants to know if I may go and play with him."

I hardly listen to the reply. Turning away, I contemplate the violet crest of the Estérel, which has just revealed itself in the gloaming so boldly that it might be taken for the outline of a cloud.

One would almost say that Jeannine was hesitating. I listen, in spite of myself, for the words that will fall from her lips—I know she will recall her brother. The child is too useful here.

But, no; she says nothing. And now the little fellow begins again:

"May I, Jeannine? May I?"

That colourless voice, changed and dejected.

"Very well, run along," Jeannine has said.

The boy makes her repeat it:

"I may go?"

"Yes—yes."

His footsteps fly along the gravel.

A deep chord vibrates within me.

A trifling incident, and yet—of infinite import. Jeannine sending her brother away. Jeannine in favour of our being alone together.

The sea glitters in the west. Elsewhere it borrows vermilion and wine-coloured reflections from the conflict of sun and shade.

I consider Jeannine, her heaving bosom, her quivering eyelashes—and her hand, her adorable child's hand, lying on the rail, hypnotises me.

I am dreaming—I no longer recognise myself; with my leg stretched out and relaxed, I dream that I am like others—a man, young and impassioned; and this girl, pale and tender, the promised creature.

Then I say:

“Our letters—were delightful.”

Jeannine does not answer, but her hand contracts convulsively. I dare everything. I dare to stretch out towards it my man's hand, big and strong. I seize it, limp and warm.

“Do you remember Le Suchet? That sunrise on the Alps.”

She turns round and looks into my eyes. The dear, tormented face—I would give the world to banish even the shadow of a grief from it.

“Michel——”

She breaks off.

“Michel, have you something to say to me?”

Her gaze puts me to confusion. I bend down and kiss her fingers; then, I find nothing to say to her, but this:

“Shake hands, Jeannine.”

A feverish pressure, in which our souls, too, hold each other first.

“Are we agreed?”

She answers: “Yes.”

The tone of her voice is no longer veiled. I gaze on her. The suffering has suddenly vanished from her

eyes. All the brilliance has returned to her complexion, just as it has to her glance. Again, the expression of which I had kept such a delightful recollection, Youth smiling at Happiness.

Am I not assisting at a like transformation in myself? I, too, with eyes re-opened, and heart illuminated and revived. All hail to the life of light.

"But, Jeannine," I ask her, at once, the past anguish throttling me again, "why have you made me suffer so much?"

"It was you," she murmurs. "Why did you stop writing to me?"

"Your last letter was so cold. You never came—there."

"I understood that you would rather we did not see you till you were—quite cured."

"An argument which I cannot refute. It's true—I did prefer that."

"And then—" She lowers her voice. "There was that other matter——"

"What matter?"

"Which I mentioned to you."

I do not understand. She continues in a more assured tone:

"Well, we're ruined. We must sell everything. We don't even know if that will be enough. Grandmother has had no luck. All her interests are in the North. She is most dreadfully unhappy about it."

So this was the reason. I am astounded, and stirred to the depths of my being. I hardly dare believe—I smile:

"Really! There really was nothing but that?"

"I got it into my head," she says. "I wanted to

put you to the proof. You never answered me on that point."

Nothing but this scruple. It was she who thought she had lost value!

"All the same," she continues, sighing as if she had been pulled out of a fathomless abyss, "if Grandmother had not been determined—that there should be an explanation——"

I cannot prevent myself saying:

"I dreaded your grandmother."

"Why?"

"I was so much afraid she might put you off."

"But why?" Jeannine repeats.

Oh, that ingenuous tone. Oh, that clear gaze and pure forehead, behind which no mental reservations could revolve.

Her fresh voice in my ear is like a bell ringing in the days of joy. I could weep—I could go down upon my knees.

"You see," she says, gravely, "those of you who come back like this, you have so great a right to choose."

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